



5-1-2019

Education Graduate Finds Passion in New Degree

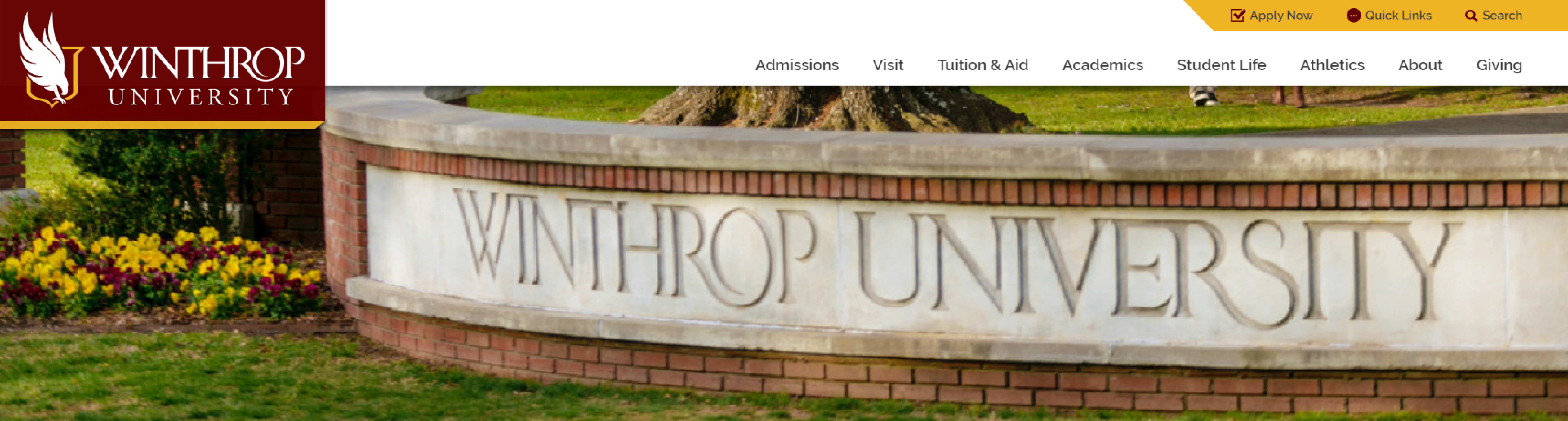
Winthrop University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/winthropnews2019>

Recommended Citation

Winthrop University, "Education Graduate Finds Passion in New Degree" (2019). *Winthrop News 2019*. 84.
<https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/winthropnews2019/84>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Winthrop News and Events Archive at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Winthrop News 2019 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@mailbox.winthrop.edu.



[Home](#) > [News Events](#) > [Education Graduate Finds Passion in New Degree](#)

[All News](#)

[Archives](#)

[RSS News Feeds](#)

[Winthrop in the News](#)

Related Links

[Dean's List](#)
[President's List](#)
[Graduates' List](#)
[The Johnsonian](#)
[Winthrop Poll](#)
[Winthrop NSSE Results](#)

Contact Information

[News & Events](#)
200 Tillman Hall
Rock Hill, SC 29733, USA
803/323-2236
803/328-2855 (Fax)

Education Graduate Finds Passion in New Degree

May 01, 2019

HIGHLIGHTS

- Burkell was the first person in her family to earn a college degree.
- Burkell will walk across the Commencement stage on May 4 with a Bachelor of Science in middle level education complete with concentrations in math and science and certifications in gifted and talented.



ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA — A body full of arthritis sparked a career change for **Melina Burkell**, a Winthrop University senior, volunteer firefighter with the Sharon Volunteer Fire Department and former vet technician.

"I couldn't see myself retiring as a groomer and vet tech," she said. "My body was being worn down lifting heavy dogs and wrestling with them to draw blood and take X-rays. My husband asked me what my passion is...I really wasn't sure."

At the time, Burkell's oldest son, Xavier, was in Scouts BSA, and she was serving as the den leader.

Her husband commented how she just lit up when surrounded by children.

"He suggested becoming a teacher - I had never thought of that!" she said. "I thought about it for a long time and decided to commit to going back for my bachelor's degree and become a teacher."

Burkell will walk across the Commencement stage on May 4 with a Bachelor of Science in middle level education complete with concentrations in math and science and certifications in gifted and talented.

The "rough, difficult road" to that stage, however, started 35 years ago in York, South Carolina.

'Education was my way out of poverty'

"I grew up very poor," Burkell said. "We were plagued with evictions, moving a lot, and going to food banks. My mom and dad divorced when I was 11, and my mom worked two jobs to take care of us."

With hardly any child support to rely on, Burkell and her brother took care of themselves and the household: cooking, cleaning, cutting the grass and maintaining the house. Her brother took on a weekend job of framing houses at 15 years old.

"I soon realized that education was my way out of poverty," she said. "I made sure to do well in school and earned the LIFE scholarship. ...I was the first person in my family with a college degree!"

She earned an Associate in Science degree and a certification in environmental technology from York Technical College while working full time. She had her first son Xavier in 2008.

But the journey wasn't even half over.

'Difficult, but it can be done'

Burkell escaped an abusive relationship and lived and worked as a single mother until 2015, when she met her current husband, Stephen, a lieutenant with a contracted security company under the Department of Homeland Security and also a volunteer firefighter. She calls Stephen "crucial" in the quest for her Winthrop degree, especially with so many other hurdles that popped up along the way – a brother diagnosed with brain cancer, a sick mother and stepfather, a miscarriage, and a fire call that left her holding a dying man in her arms.

"Stephen and I have a very special relationship," she said. "He cooks dinner and helps clean the house. He is more than supportive. He holds me accountable for my school work. When this began, he told me that my job is now school. He made sure that I made it a priority, and he took care of the other things that he knew I would be doing to free up my time.

"Needless to say, it was difficult, but it can be done....Granted, we don't get a lot of husband and wife dates, but the time we spend together is treasured."

Burkell and her husband welcomed son Alex last spring. She kept impeccable to-do lists and a calendar and juggled her schoolwork with work, children, tutoring and volunteerism.

She added that everyone at Winthrop has been so understanding and helpful.

"They were all willing to help me out in whatever way possible," she said. "They have even allowed me to bring my oldest son to class on days when I couldn't get alternate care. Despite all of this, I have maintained a 3.97 GPA. It has been difficult but anything in life worth doing will be! I am proud of my journey."

'You CAN do it'

Burkell has lots of advice for others who may be struggling in life, including not getting overwhelmed by the long-term and not feeding into negativity.

"Have someone you can call or talk to when you start to feel that negativity creep in," she said. "Let them be your personal cheerleader. For me, that was my husband, son and best friends. There were times I wanted to quit. You will have those times, too. That's when your personal cheerleaders are needed most. You CAN do it; you have to believe in yourself and have others who believe in you too!"

For more information, contact **Nicole Chisari**, communications coordinator, at 803/323-2236 or chisarin@winthrop.edu.

◀ ALL NEWS

SHARE



803/323-2211

701 Oakland Avenue
Rock Hill, SC 29733
Contact Us



[Future Students](#)
[Parents & Families](#)
[Visitors](#)
[Alumni](#)
[Faculty & Staff](#)
[Current Students](#)

[Calendar](#)
[Campus Map](#)
[Employment](#)
[Safety/Emergency](#)
[Give Now](#)

[A-Z Index](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Text Version](#)
[Web Accessibility](#)
[Web Site Feedback](#)