



ELIZABETH FITZGERALD '15

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE & ELMS COLLEGE

off campus

Stay-at-home Mom to Honors Grad

In 2000, Elizabeth Jones dropped out of Holyoke Community College (HCC), convinced college was “an impossible task.” Fourteen years, one husband (Michael Fitzgerald) and six children (Elise, 11; Rachel, 9; Clairys, 5; Lillian, 4; Savannah, 3; and Autumn, 18 months) later, she graduated from Elms College’s off-campus program at HCC with a perfect 4.0 GPA, and dual degrees in accounting and business management and marketing. During her senior year, Elizabeth also received a number of scholarships including the Jane M. Klausman Women in Business Scholarship from the Zonta International Club of Quaboag Valley, the Jane M. Klausman Women in Business Scholarship from Zonta International Club’s District 1, the Women in Business Scholarship from *Western Mass Women Magazine*, and two scholarships from the Western Mass Community Foundation. At Honors Convocation on May 1, Elizabeth was inducted into the Delta Epsilon Sigma, Kappa Gamma Pi and Alpha Sigma Lambda honor societies. She will enter the Elms MBA program in July, even as she and Michael, who graduated in May from Westfield State University, both begin new careers. Here’s Elizabeth, in her own words, explaining how both she and Michael were able to be full-time honor students while raising six children in Huntington, Massachusetts.

When I married my husband, I became an instant mother of his two daughters, and we made plans to continue to grow our family. In 2011, my husband was faced with either taking a 50 percent pay cut or being laid off from his factory job, with our fourth child on her way. We were at a point where, with the commitment of my parents, he could go back to school, and have something more promising and passionate than walking a production line for the rest of his life, so he went back to school.

I saw his dedication and commitment, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. He showed me that I too could go back and be successful, and finish what I had started. In the fall of 2012, after giving birth to our fifth daughter, I picked up the pieces from 13 years ago, and sought to do my best and obtain my degree in accounting. This would allow me to get my CPA license and build a business from home so our children could have the presence of a parent in the home and still have the benefit of two incomes.

In the summer of 2013, my husband and I had the privilege of being able to graduate together—cap and gown, side by side—with our associate’s degrees from HCC, with honors. And, that fall, we continued our educational journey together; he went to Westfield State and I began the Elms/HCC accelerated program on Friday nights and Saturdays.

Both of us have faced many struggles and sacrifices, but could not have gotten this far without the love we have for each other and our family, along with the support and dedication from my parents to see that we would become college graduates. Both my husband and I were the first children of our parents to graduate, and my husband is the first graduate in his family ever—and with not just one degree, but two. We both set the bar high among our peers by achieving academic recognition and have placed on the dean’s list every semester we have been in school.

None of this would have been possible for me if Elms didn’t offer the Friday night and Saturday program. Also, the staff is there with us every step of the way: Joyce Desorcy and Sr. Kay Reagan. There is a genuine interest in the growth and development of each student from our professors: letters of recommendation whenever we need, and celebrations when we succeed.

In January, I started an internship with Meyers Brothers Kalicka (MBK) for their tax season. I was actually connected with one of their senior managers, Melyssa Brown, via Professor Amanda Houston Garcia, at the Western Mass Woman’s Magazine Top 25 Women in Business event. I had brought a few copies of my resume with me to the event, because I knew there would be networking opportunities. Little did I realize that was where my career path would start.

A couple weeks after the event, I received an offer for the internship. At the conclusion, I was given the opportunity to review my internship with the partner in charge and the director of operations as an interview for a permanent job. MBK was looking to hire three new audit and accounting associates, and a summer intern—and over 300 people had applied. I, the other individual who interned the same time as I did, and a recent Westfield State graduate each received offers for an A&A associate position.

In July, I begin my MBA in accounting with Elms and the hard road to my CPA license. I'm fully confident that I will stay with Meyers Brothers in the long term as my education and career continue to develop. My hope is to continue to succeed and shine at Elms as I pursue my master's, and find ways to shine at MBK and add value to the firm.

Now for my husband: His graduation from Westfield State was the same day as mine—same place, just different times. I couldn't be more proud of him; he has found something he is passionate about and is continuing to push himself. He finished his BA with two majors: criminal justice and political science. Last December, he started working with Clinical Support & Options as a therapeutic mentor/in-home therapist. This fall, he will further his studies by pursuing a master's in public administration. He has a heart for public service. Since his passion lies with mentoring youth and I will be able to handle the finance side of a small business, we would love to start our own group home for troubled teens. We want to get them before they get into the "system."

People ask me all the time, "How do you do it?" But, honestly, since I dropped out of school when I was young, single and kid-free, I couldn't have done this without them or the loving support that my husband provides to encourage me to do well. This last semester, while I was working 36 hours a week, he was doing both school and work full time, but he watched the kids Friday nights and all day Saturday so I could go to my classes—and then he did the same on Sundays so I could go to Worcester to visit my mom in the hospital, as she is battling cancer and has been there with my dad since January.

This is what family is all about: loving and supporting one another, and doing what it takes to provide that love and support. I am truly grateful for all that God has blessed me with.

I can't express enough my gratitude towards Elms and having this degree program available to me; otherwise I'd be a stay-at-home mom with no real career prospects to look forward to. ■

Social work major Rebecca Burgos '15 of Springfield, MA, just graduated, but she isn't resting on her laurels. She doesn't have time: Grad school starts May 28. Higher education is important, especially in our society now. "I appreciate that Elms got me on the right path, and I feel like I need to continue, since the ball is already rolling," she said.

Rebecca, who just completed the 20-month bachelor's degree in social work offered through the Elms-Springfield Technical Community College partnership, was accepted into the full-time MSW program at Springfield College. And, thanks to the rigorous Elms program, she was given advanced standing, which means she'll graduate with her master's degree next summer.

Social Work Grad Following Her Heart to Help Others

"It was pretty strenuous, but I made it through," she said. She had good motivation: following her heart. "I see myself working with substance abuse. That's kind of my passion," Rebecca added. "That's what motivates me. I was raised in a broken family, so maybe that innate drive is what guides me in that direction."

For her 400-hour field placement, required of all social work students at Elms, Rebecca shadowed a correctional case worker at Ludlow Correctional Facility from September through April. It was a good experience, she said. "My associate's degree was in criminal justice, and there's a criminal justice aspect in social work, so I see myself doing something like that," she added. "Perhaps not in the jail facility—I got a lot of recommendations to apply—but with that same population, maybe in the community. I want to work with people after incarceration, maybe somewhere in those programs within the sheriff's department, or within the court system."

Many of her classmates plan to work with children and families, but Rebecca is trying to "steer away" from that route to work with adults. "Maybe a probation officer, if not something with the substance-abuse aspect," she said. "I just take

one step at a time. That's what's so beneficial about the social work degree: There are so many different directions that one can take," she said.

The work will likely impact families, however. "The benefits of working with children are great," she said, "but I see it more like: If we tackle the problem of substance abuse, then that in turn will create the reunification of the families. It's like a ripple effect. That's my passion."

Her own children, ages 16 and 3, are another motivating factor. "The 3-year-old is what motivated me to get back into school, because I had been out of school for some time," Rebecca said. "I had my hands pretty full with the 20-month program, and the placement, and my little one at home."

The Elms-STCC program's convenient structure was a huge draw for Rebecca, and she liked the professors,

but she said her cohort made a big difference in her success. "You progress through the entire program with the same cohort," she said. "That's good, because it's kind of like your family outside of your family, and you're all experiencing the same struggles. I strived to help anyone who was lingering behind, and things like that." ■

