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Mom graduates from welfare

She has 3 kids, a 4.0 GPA and a degree from Northern Kentucky University

By Howard McEwen
Enquirer contributor

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - When Christa Kilvington walked across the Northern Kentucky University commencement stage this month, she exchanged a welfare check for a diploma. The self-described "welfare mother" of three graduated summa cum laude with a 4.0 grade-point average, majoring in speech communication.

"She is loved, admired and respected by so many professors in our department, and by faculty, staff and students across campus," said professor Russell Proctor. "Christa is one of life's really good people."

Four years ago, Kilvington was a travel agent raising three kids on her own.

She had escaped an abusive first marriage, and her second marriage ended when her husband went to prison. She was making \$9 per hour and had no health insurance, sick days or vacation time.

"It was a pretty low-paying job to take care of four people," she said.

Then came 9/11.

"I'd been a travel agent for all that time and knew that that industry was never going to be the same and there was no future there," she said.

Going to college wasn't her first choice when she became unemployed. "All I was thinking was that I needed to get working," she said.

It had been 17 years since she had graduated from high school, and she had never been in a college class.

"I would be going to school with kids half my age," she said. But she decided to attend NKU.

"One of the first classes that I had was a speech class, and my speech teacher, Dr. Pam Tyahur, was so enthusiastic and encouraging that I thought maybe I could do this."

Kilvington looked into public assistance through the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program to help pay the bills.

"The only way to improve my standard of living was to get an education," she said.

Her monthly payments were \$328 per month. This was supplemented with Section 8 housing and food stamps, but that left little for car insurance, gas, utilities or other needs.

Her struggle has given Kilvington a unique perspective. She is a successful college student, but also a single mother of three who is on welfare.



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Christa Kilvington graduated from Northern Kentucky University on Dec. 17 with a degree in speech communication. Her three children are Arielle, 17; Alison, 8; and Timmy, 6.

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"At school I'm respected because I'm a top student," she said.

But off campus, things are different. "Those who know me from my economic circumstances see me differently, my IQ drops dozens of points and I become stupid and lazy and unambitious.

"At NKU, there's diversity classes addressing race, religion and ethnicity, but there's no diversity class for lower socio-economic status people," she said.

Kilvington is looking for a job. "I'd like to get into copy editing. My other interest is doing training. I'm very good at verbal and written presentations," she said.

She'll also have time for her kids. Her son is excited that she is finished with school. "He said, 'You're going to be fun again.' "

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