

Giving Back

Liz Thomas

Liz Thomas got her degree from Eastern the hard way. She was a single mother of two teenagers, working at Eastern and going to school at the same time. She eventually received her degree in Public Policy and Government about the time she turned 47 years of age.

Now living in Williamsburg, VA, her daughter and son grown, Thomas recently made a gift to the new scholarship she established that is her largest to date and significant enough to endow it. The Elizabeth A. Thomas Endowed Scholarship can now be awarded on a permanent basis to students who are single mothers, as she was when a student.

Thomas says she could not have completed her own education without the scholarship aid she received. “As a non-traditional student, I looked forward to finally having a rewarding career, to becoming financially stable, and to financing a college education for my children,” she said. “The financial assistance made it happen.”

It still wasn't easy, though. “I always had to worry about finances even with the financial assistance,” she said in answer to questions about how financial assistance helped her manage her finances and concentrate on her studies. “In receiving financial assistance I was able to let go of one of the part-time jobs I had, giving me more time to study. My hope is that this scholarship will help other single mothers who face these same time and financial problems.”

Thomas didn't quit with her Eastern degree. She had developed an interest in sociology while at Eastern, and later studied at the University of York in England, known for its social policy research program. Meanwhile her daughter Kimberly took the traditional route, graduating at 21 from Eastern, just a few years behind her mother. She is now a language teacher at a D.C. area high school.



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Liz Thomas '94

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Barbara Candales

Her Eastern education was the springboard for a successful academic and social work career for Barbara Candales, so she decided in 2008 to give back to Eastern in a way that would help her fellow Latino and Latina students who are future social workers and honor the memory of her parents at the same time.

That year she established the Arturo and Elba Memorial Endowed Scholarship with an initial gift large enough to endow it on the spot, and she has since made two more substantial gifts, as other supportive alumni have made smaller gifts to build the scholarship fund further. Her parents were “very grateful for the many opportunities and support provided at Eastern,” Candales said.

“The success of Latino students can be ensured by making graduation a reality,” Candales believes. “A solid educational foundation will provide a competitive edge in employment and in life. Making a commitment to partner with Eastern by supporting the financial needs of Latino students is the greatest gift to future generations.”

After earning her Eastern degree in Sociology and Applied Social Relations in 1974, Candales went on to earn a master’s degree in Social Work and Public Health and a Ph.D. in Adult Learning from the University of Connecticut, and launched a distinguished teaching career. She taught at UConn’s School of Social Work, was a professor and program administrator at Tunxis Community College, and was a professor and director of the Social Work program at Central Connecticut State University. She won a teaching award at Central in 2005 and was named Social Worker of the Year the following year by Connecticut Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Since her retirement as an academic, she has become an Advanced Certified Personal and Executive Coach (ACPEC), working with already successful people to help them achieve even more in their careers and personal lives.

Candales chose to memorialize her parents in large part because of the contributions they made as leaders of the then fledgling Puerto Rican community in New London in the 1960s and 1970s. They worked to establish Nuestra Casa, the first Latino agency in New London, to provide services to the emerging Latino community, and that work inspired her to enter the social work field, she explained.



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Barbara Candales '74

Giving Back

Sharon Mendes

Sharon Mendes and Liz Thomas have much in common. Both were non-traditional students who already had children when they enrolled at Eastern, both have a child who became a traditional Eastern student and both are now donors.

While Thomas established her own scholarship to help someone whose circumstances are similar to hers when she attended Eastern, Mendes has given to an existing scholarship fund set up to support students like her. Thomas' daughter, Kimberly, graduated in 1999, while Mendes' son, Anthony, graduated in 2009 after majoring in history and running cross country and track at Eastern. Sharon Mendes works full time as an academic advisor at UConn.

"I decided to contribute to the Ellen Lang scholarship because I was lucky enough to have been chosen twice as a recipient of the scholarship. I felt it was very important to give back to an organization that I had previously received help from," she said.

While the aid helped her manage the financial burden of attending college, Mendes says the money wasn't the most important aspect of receiving scholarships. "In many ways, being awarded a scholarship gave me personal validation more than financial relief; I was being rewarded and recognized for my hard work and diligence." She still had to apply for loans to finance her education, she explained, but the financial aid reduced her debt burden.

Then the next generation benefitted in the same fashion. Mendes noted that "because of my past experience I encouraged my son, Anthony, to also apply for scholarships, which he was privileged to receive."

Anthony's views are similar to his mother's: "The money helps. Even if it's only \$500 or \$1,000, it's something we don't have to pay or work for. Also knowing that I was selected and met the requirements is a good feeling." The younger Mendes also notes that he enjoyed meeting the people whose generosity resulted in his scholarship awards.

(Anthony received the Sodexo Scholarship for 2008-09, and the Frances Karlyn Zittel Endowed Award for 2007-08.)



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Sharon Mendes '04