

LIFETIME program helps welfare moms navigate the college path

By Patricia L. Brennan

When Melissa Johnson walked across the stage to receive her nursing diploma in 2008, it wasn't the piece of paper that mattered. It wasn't even the accomplishments that the diploma represented. What really counted was the look of pride in the eyes of her 7-year-old daughter, Brooklyn.

Johnson's higher education journey began in 2002. She had just escaped an abusive relationship and was a young, single mother, raising baby Brooklyn while trying to attend Woodland Community College. She was on welfare, drawing benefits from a program called California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs). When Johnson's CalWORKs counselor told her about a leadership conference on women who completed college while on welfare, she was immediately interested.



Melissa Johnson of Davis, California, shares a light moment with her daughter Brooklyn.

"It was energizing," recalls Johnson, now 33. "It was also empowering to meet others who were going through the same struggles as I was and to hear their stories."

The speaker Johnson found most inspiring was Diana Spatz, executive director of a program called Low Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME). Spatz' presentation about her work to help welfare mothers reach their educational and career goals struck a chord with Johnson.

At the time, Johnson, 33, wanted to fulfill a lifelong dream to become a nurse. There was one problem, though: She couldn't get her education hours to count as a welfare-to-work activity. When she sought help from CalWORKs, she came away with more questions than answers.

"Once you sign the contract (to receive welfare benefits), it appears to be set in stone. At one point, I was told I could no longer receive benefits if I continued my education for nursing," Johnson says. "I was a year away from being done with nursing school. CalWORKs wouldn't budge. It was more about finding a quick fix in minimum-wage job rather than getting the degree I was so close to getting."



Johnson remembered what Spatz had said at the conference she attended: "There's always a way to keep your dreams intact." Johnson called LIFETIME, and a member of its staff, Anita Rees, accompanied Johnson to a meeting with her CalWORKs counselor.

Whether it was the presence of a representative from LIFETIME or Johnson's impassioned plea that made an impact—or both—the end result was positive. A week later, Johnson got a phone call from the county. She would be allowed to complete her nursing studies *and* retain her welfare benefits.

"It was (LIFETIME's) Anita who helped me gather the paperwork I needed to make my case," Johnson recalls. "She knew the policies and made them work for me. Without her help, I would have been stuck. It would have taken me much longer to reach my goals."

A 2006 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research illustrates the impact of LIFETIME in helping welfare mothers pursue higher education. Three out of four women surveyed at LIFETIME meetings or events said the group played a critical role in their educational success. More than 42 percent said LIFETIME raised their awareness about gaining access to higher education.

"So much of what I got out of LIFETIME just made me a better person overall," Johnson adds. "The people there taught me how to advocate for myself and to stand up for I know is right."

Johnson is now standing tall. After receiving an associate's degree from Woodland Community College, Johnson went on to Sacramento State University, where she graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in nursing.

Today, Johnson makes more than \$90,000 a year as a nurse in the cancer wing of the UC-Davis Medical Center. Her story illustrates not only the struggles welfare mothers face in pursuing higher education but also what can happen when they get the right kinds of support.

Perhaps even more important, Johnson's story shows that government assistance need not create generational cycles of dependency. In fact, when offered wisely, it can actually *prevent* such cycles.

"When I walked up to receive my nursing diploma, it was important that my daughter was there," Johnson says. "She's the reason for my determination. She's seen my struggles first hand. I hope my story shows her that she can be whatever she wants to be in life."

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