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The secret to graduation

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Office of Communications & Marketing

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Lead photo by Meghann Bledsoe

For immediate release

The secret to graduation

By Lisa Sells

November 10, 2023

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

Editor's Note: We're honoring Ouachita's first-generation students, alumni, faculty and staff throughout November with special events and emphases, including a series of weekly posts authored by first gens on the Stories blog. Read about our campus celebrations and find more stories at obu.edu/firstgen.

My maternal grandparents grew up in the Depression-era poverty that surrounded the lumber mills around Ashdown, Ark. When World War II ended, and my grandfather came home from the front lines in Europe, there was no work in the Texarkana area. He and his young family moved to northeastern Oklahoma where he found a job at the newly opened BF Goodrich tire factory.

And so it is that my story starts in Commerce, Okla., and not Ashdown, Ark.

My graduating high school class had less than 70 people in it. To my memory, not many people in Commerce, other than my teachers, had a college degree. Instead, most everyone in my world had parents who worked at Goodrich, or farmed, or ran some kind of small business around the area. My dad and uncle owned and operated a Phillips 66 service station back in the era when station owners also fixed flat tires and did nearly all car maintenance. My mom was a pharmacy tech for a while and then did inside sales at another nearby factory.

Everyone who went to college from my high school went to the local junior college in nearby Miami. I was a good student who loved school, so I went to Northeastern Oklahoma A&M, too. I majored in English because I loved literature and writing, and because I loved all my high school English teachers who, through books, had intentionally introduced the universe to a kid from a small town in the middle of nowhere.

I floundered my first semester of college. Skipped way too many classes and worked way too many hours at the factory. I wasn't keeping up with my course load. About Thanksgiving, I realized that doing well academically at Commerce High School did not automatically mean passing Econ I in college. I was about to fail a class. So, I cut back on working, started going to class, and did the one thing that every other college graduate must do — I didn't quit. Four years later, I graduated *summa cum laude* from Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., where I had met Ben.

Though I am proudly the first person on either side of my family to graduate from college, I love the blue-collar world of my childhood and the people there who formed the backdrop for the early canvas of my story. That heritage is why it is such a great joy to be an advocate for the many first-generation students who come to Ouachita. I hope someday you find me on campus and tell me your story.

And in turn, I will happily remind you of the one secret to graduating from college: "Don't quit!"



Ouachita First Lady Lisa Sells shares her story with other first-generation students.

EMERSON THOMPSON



By Ouachita First Lady Lisa Sells