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Many detours on the road to UIS degree

Accident just the latest delay for woman who started in '78

By [CHRIS DETTRO](#)
STAFF WRITER

Published Saturday, May 10, 2008

After Veronica Schulz-Lehr was catapulted with her motorcycle to the side of a highway nearly three years ago, finishing her college degree was the farthest thing from her mind.

She just wanted to survive the injuries she suffered near Peru when the semi tractor-trailer struck her motorcycle, lifting the rear of the bike off the ground and spinning it around like a Ferris wheel, with Schulz-Lehr still holding on to the handlebars.



Veronica Schulz-Lehr will graduate from the University of Illinois at Springfield Saturday, after recovering from injuries suffered in a serious motorcycle accident in 2005. Photo courtesy of Veronica Schulz-Lehr

Advertisement

Today, Schulz-Lehr and nearly 1,300 others will graduate from the University of Illinois at Springfield. For Schulz-Lehr, it's been a long, hard ride.

Schulz-Lehr, 49, started taking college classes in 1978 in her native Chicago suburbs after she was discharged from the Navy.

She had her second child in the early 1980s, but, while living in Minnesota, ended up at a battered women's shelter.

She returned to Illinois and worked off and on, then took a few more classes at the College of DuPage. In 1988, then living in Quincy, she "really started getting back into school."

Schulz-Lehr managed to finish her associate's degree in 1991. "But I never found anything I could apply it to," she said.

She decided to go into social work and started in the children and family-counseling program at what was then Sangamon State

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University, making the 214-mile roundtrip from Quincy to attend night classes.

"I drove a Datsun 210, and at the end of the spring semester, the body of the car just collapsed on the engine," she said. "I had no car, so I couldn't come back to school."

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought more stress to Schulz-Lehr's life. In addition to raising her two children, two failed marriages added to her burden. "I just made bad choices," she said.

In 2001, she again started classes at the University of Illinois at Springfield and continued until 2003. But she remarried, this time happily, and school was again put on hold.

Then on June 3, 2005, Schulz-Lehr and her husband were attending a motorcycle rally in LaSalle County when Schulz-Lehr pulled onto the highway and was struck by the semi.

Her left hip and ankle were broken, as were several ribs, her right forearm and the bones around her right eye.

"I always wore a leather aviator-type helmet," she said. "The doctor told me that if I had on a regular, heavy helmet, I would have snapped my head back and broken my neck."

"Lots and lots" of surgeries followed, the latest occurring only last year.

During her long rehab, Schulz-Lehr was feeling frustrated because she wasn't able to work.

"I went to Rehabilitation Services (a division of the state Department of Human Services) and a counselor there helped me look at my options," she said. "It became very clear that it was school."

Schulz-Lehr remembered the long drive and said she was leery of the whole idea. But she did it anyway.

Disability payments have helped pay some of her bills, and she completed an internship at Jacksonville Developmental Center.

"The people there are amazing," she said. "The encouragement and opportunities I got there will definitely be well used in the future."

She also completed a Department of Transportation motorcycle safety course last summer and finished second in her class.

"My husband got such a charge out of that," she said.

Schulz-Lehr's goal is to work on her master's degree. But for now, she's happy to have earned her bachelor's degree in social work.

"I'm still kind of in the 'pinch me, I'm dreaming' stage," she said. "It's been established since 1978 that my education will be a lifelong

process."

Chris Dettro can be reached at 788-1510.

Burke to give commencement address

Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne M. Burke will deliver the commencement address at the University of Illinois at Springfield commencement ceremonies at 2 p.m. today at the Prairie Capital Convention Center.

Of the 1,292 students eligible to graduate, 715 will participate in the ceremony.

Tickets are required for admission until 15 minutes before the ceremony. Seating will be on a first-come, first-served basis. The doors to the main floor of The Center will open at 1 p.m.

Burke founded the Chicago Special Olympics, which grew to become the International Special Olympics in 1968. She was appointed to the 1st District Appellate Court in 1995 and served there until her appointment to the Illinois Supreme Court in July 2006.

Henry Nicholson, associate professor of communication, will be grand marshal. The student speaker will be Denean Vreeland, who will receive a bachelor's degree in mathematical sciences.

Reader Comments - 10 comments

helmets -- not just for looks wrote at 5/10/2008 7:58:37 AM

I continue to be amazed that helmet legislation goes nowhere in IL. Glad Ms. Lehr finished her degree, but a helmet probably would not have "killed her" -- it is good she survived her injuries and helmets would prevent many more deaths.

anon. wrote at 5/10/2008 9:22:20 AM

from everything I've read, pretty much the only people protected by a helmet are the ones involved in slow speed accidents. Highway speeds seem to be fatal in most instances.

Mark Observed wrote at 5/10/2008 9:53:02 AM

To helmet, I am glad you are such an "expert" that you can offer us your opinion that counters the doctor's opinion that actually examined her after the accident. I actually ride a motorcycle and have for over thirty years. Sometimes I choose to wear a helmet and sometimes I don't. I have survived three accidents without any serious injuries. The first one was my fault, the other two were not. The first one was due to my lack of education and experience the other two were the results of distracted car drivers. The answer to saving lives of those who ride are twofold. More rider education (motorcycle safety courses) and more driver awareness of motorcycles.

helmets are NOT a win win. wrote at 5/10/2008 4:02:47 PM

A helmet killed my sis-n-laws brother. 2 weeks before by brothers wedding. This is not conjecture, just the truth... what a mess. They decided to go ahead with the "formalities" It was like Mikey's funeral all over again. Abington, Ill. 1979.

You never know wrote at 5/10/2008 4:37:11 PM

with a helmet. My best friend was involved in a serious accident a few years back, and was NOT wearing a helmet. He didn't get a scratch on his head, but his hip/legs/arms were a mess. Lucky for him. The best way to avoid an accident is to stay off the bike completely.

You Are Missing the Point wrote at 5/10/2008 6:17:53 PM

Ok, every one, let's get off the helmet thing and congratulate this woman on accomplishing something that many people only wish they had done. Yes, its great she survived a devastating motorcycle crash and that she was smart enough to wear a helmet but getting her degree from this school after all these years instead of setting for what she had is a huge accomplishment.