

Class comes together to help graduate

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For more than 28 years, Jo Prescott has remained virtually motionless - spending her life as a quadriplegic after surviving gunshot wounds inflicted by her estranged husband.

Remarkably, the recent USC Aiken graduate still maintains a long reach, positively influencing the lives of others even as they try to assist her.

Prescott participated in the commencement ceremony earlier this month, completing a degree in sociology 25 years after she initially enrolled at the university.

At the rehearsal, sociology instructor Beth Williams and her human services students presented Prescott with a check for \$3,152.42, the funds they raised during the past semester. They were joined by members of the Midland Valley Chamber of Commerce, which contributed the first \$1,000 of the donation.

Williams often had seen Prescott at the Humanities and Social Sciences building, waiting in her wheelchair for public transportation to arrive. As Williams learned, Prescott's frequent absences from USCA over the years - the longest period being a full decade - were caused by health problems and transportation concerns. She has her own specially designed van, but it is 23 years old, unreliable and currently not in service.

With her sociology degree, Prescott hopes to work formally with women who have been victims of abuse, to let them know that if she can control of her life, so can they. Her goals resonated with Williams' students.

"The kids were upset that there was no way to help her immediately," Williams said. "We couldn't change the public transportation system so, with her permission, we made her a client and agreed to a fundraiser."

Midland Valley Chamber president Al McKay learned about the project from his wife Carol, a USCA staff member, and from another Chamber member, USCA staffer Jeff Jenik. The organization promptly agreed to establish an account in Prescott's name and made the first contribution to get it started. The account - Josephine Prescott Change for Change - remains active at Security Federal Bank.

Williams' students held a formal fundraiser Oct. 22, selling items donated by the class members and others through the generosity of area businesses.

Prescott knew Williams had a presentation planned at the graduation rehearsal, but she was stunned by the amount. Given the age of her existing van, she's considering using the donation toward purchasing a newer used model.

"I'm still in awe," she said. "Usually young people don't think like that. It's so exciting, but it still hasn't sunk in yet."

The human services class was targeted at students considering careers in social service agencies. Williams invited several agency directors in Aiken to speak to the students and emphasized that people in the field are always in service to others.

The class taught junior Kiersten Watkins a lot about social work and how the system operates, giving her an idea of the experiences and challenges she can expect. She had seen Prescott on campus and marvels at her perseverance through such difficult times over nearly three decades.

"She is really an inspiration," Watkins said of Prescott. "Helping her has made us understand how to put together a project to help someone in need. We just saw that need and responded to it. It's not a great change, but in a small but meaningful way we impacted her life. It was as rewarding to us as it was to her."

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