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WKU-O holds drive thru celebration for graduates

By Christie Netherton Messenger-Inquirer

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Shawn Payne left, and Ceara Thomas gets their photograph taken as they pose with Big Red on Friday during the Western Kentucky University-Owensboro drive-thru graduation celebration in front of the L. Reid Haire Administration Building on campus.

Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer | awarren@messenger-inquirer.com

Western Kentucky University-Owensboro held a drive-thru graduation celebration for students Friday outside the L. Reid Haire Administration Building.

The official graduation celebration, according to administrative assistant Judy Rouse, will be held in Bowling Green.

"It's just our way of celebrating our students," she said.

The celebration also honored students who graduated last year as well but were unable to attend commencement ceremonies due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amanda Brothers, who attended Friday's event, graduated in August 2020 with a bachelor's degree in social work and began a master's program in social work two weeks later, which she expects to complete by May 2022. She also plans to walk at the Bowling Green ceremony.

Brothers said her journey to receive higher education has been "a crazy ride."

"I have three kiddos ... When my son was 1, his dad kicked us out and we became homeless. That was roughly nine years ago. We lived in a homeless shelter in Texas and stayed there for a year until I could get on my feet and kind of figure out what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go," she said.

Once Brothers was in a good place, she moved to Owensboro to help her father who had been diagnosed with colon cancer in 2014. Six months after he died, her mother was also diagnosed with cancer and passed away last November.

"I was in the middle of my master's program. I don't know how I did it, other than the great support of my professors. It's just been...a journey," she said. "I'm super blessed because I have this amazing support system.

"It's so much more to celebrate when you have people around you. Find your support ... If you would have asked me nine years ago who are you ... I was broken. Insecure. Scared to do anything with my life, and now I know who I am and I'm ... awesome."

Also attending the celebration were two Owensboro Community & Technical College faculty members who were graduating from WKU-O, Shawn Payne and Cearly Thomas.

Both began their education at OCTC and transferred to WKU to complete their bachelor's degrees in organizational leadership through WKU's transfer program with OCTC.

Payne, who is the department head of Advanced Manufacturing and Skilled Trades at OCTC, said he began his higher education journey in 2011.

"I'm super excited. I'm looking forward to my evenings and Sunday mornings of not doing homework," Payne said.

Payne also plans to walk at the Bowling Green ceremony.

Thomas, who works as a success coach at OCTC, said she began pursuing her bachelor's degree in 2017 and graduated last year. She is now working on her master's degree in organizational leadership.

"Reaching this point is pretty awesome. I'm the first in my family to graduate from college," she said. "I'm a mom too, of a young child, so it has its ups and downs, but it's worth it."

Thomas said she plans to wait until she completes her master's program before participating in a graduation ceremony, but she enjoyed being able to celebrate reaching this point in her education.

Christie Netherton, cnetherton@messenger-inquirer.com, 270-691-7360

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