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NIU Today

Ready to teach: Second PLEDGE cohort celebrates ECC-NIU education degrees --- 5/16/2022

Michael Brady's motivation appeared when he was in sixth-grade – in the form of a male teacher.

For Jocelyne Escontrias, the role models in those **School District U-46** classrooms shared her culture: “It was just great to see people lead by example in that way,” she said. “I just want to give back and be that representation for students.”

Jennifer Tovar also credits her teachers at **Huff Elementary School**.

“I just loved the way that they made me feel welcome in their classrooms, and they really inspired me to become a teacher,” she said. “I want to be like them to inspire other kids and to educate them as well.”

Danielle Lauritzen, meanwhile, appreciated the support she received from district speech-language pathologists and physical therapists. She thought it would lead her to a career in nursing, but a part-time job pointed her instead to teaching.

“Working in a little-kid daycare, I found that I really loved working with young people, and I ended up realizing that I really love seeing them grow and change and learn things,” she said. “Being able to see that change and growth was key for me in wanting to be an educator.”

No matter the reasons for pursuing **NIU's B.S.Ed. in Elementary Education** with Bilingual/ESL endorsement, these four and their 16 classmates in the second PLEDGE cohort at **Elgin Community College** all are about to achieve their dreams to teach.



Graduating Saturday, May 14, with Brady, Escontrias, Lauritzen and Tovar are Mayra Carachure, Yolanda Chavez, Daisy Cintora, Alexie Corral, Alexandra Graham, Allison Hill, Karen Monraga, Nancy Mayen, Daniella Mejia, Lupe Moreno, Emily Neuman, Lisette Pena, Ana Dominguez Quevedo, Cassidy Sell, Yoseline Temores and Leslie Villa.

The 20 students gathered May 6 in the Elgin Community College Dining Room with family, friends, professors, academic advisors, clinical supervisors and administrators to celebrate those bachelor's degrees and the bright futures that await them this fall.

Laurie Elish-Piper, dean of the NIU College of Education, told the audience that the **PLEDGE (Partnering to Lead and Empower District-Grown Educators)** collaboration is mutually beneficial for both institutions and the broader community amid the Illinois teacher shortage and the need to supply classrooms with a culturally diverse workforce.



Laurie Elish-Piper and David Sam

“Everyone is trying to figure out what we can do to prepare the teachers that we need for our schools today, and everyone’s saying, ‘It’s so complicated. How can we solve this problem?’ Well, I would argue that it’s not that complicated at all,” Elish-Piper said.

“It’s really a matter of coming together as partners and thinking about how to leverage community resources and support to be able to grow teachers who are from the community and who want to teach and live and work in the community,” she added. “That’s exactly what we’re doing here today. This is a model that works.”

David Sam, president of Elgin Community College, congratulated the students who started and completed their higher education on his campus through the PLEDGE model.

Teachers, Sam said, were the people who made the greatest impression on his life.

“You are entering this profession whereby you are going to impact the lives of so many people for years to come, and you may not get to see the impact on these students,” Sam said. “That’s OK. I can assure you that you are making those impacts.”

Launched in the fall of 2019, the PLEDGE program at ECC already has achieved something extraordinary: a 100% graduation rate. Every student who started has finished, **including last year’s first cohort of 15**, and the same feat is expected from the current third cohort of 18.



Tammy Scheibe, clinical supervisor in the NIU Department of Curriculum and Instruction, presents gifts to Lupe Moreno.

Such success is partially a result of creating an ECC-to-NIU College of Education path that is accessible, affordable and designed specifically to meet and support the needs of place-bound, working adults with family responsibilities.

NIU degrees in **Early Childhood Education** now have been added to the program, combining with Elementary Education to put dozens of future teachers in the pipeline.

Graduates will take jobs in the Elgin area to provide children with empathetic teachers who bring a lifelong familiarity and understanding of the community and its families.

And, Elish-Piper said, Algonquin-based **Community Unit School District 300** and Burlington-based **Central School District 301** now are joining U-46 in PLEDGE participation.

“Before this partnership, a lot of students only wished that they could be elementary teachers because of their previous commitments, family commitments, jobs, funds, time,” said **Elizabeth Herrera**, an academic advisor at ECC. “We’ve been able to make that dream come true.”

Elish-Piper told the audience how the dream began.

“**Lisa Freeman**, the president of Northern Illinois University, oftentimes says that relationships are resources, and as I look at this remarkable partnership, it’s built on relationships,” she said.

“About six years ago, I walked into work and I had an idea: I thought, ‘What if we took our Teacher Education program to the campus of Elgin Community College?’ because I had heard that there were tons of amazing students here who would complete their associate degrees but then had difficulty figuring out a successful pathway to get their bachelor’s degrees and professional educator licensure,” she added.

“So I did what I always do. I thought, ‘Who do I know that can help us do this? Who can partner with us on this?’ And so I picked up the telephone and I called **Dr. Parul Raval**, who I knew from her doctoral program at Northern Illinois University. She answered the phone, and she said, ‘I think it’s a good idea.’



An apple for the teacher: Clinical supervisor Randi White presents gifts to Karen Monraga.

THE 2022 GRADUATES WOULD agree.

Brady currently works for UPS in Palatine, where he is a classroom facilitator for new hires and a lead trainer. Income from that job allows him to pay for college, he said, and offers a tuition reimbursement benefit as well.



Michael Brady

Palatine is also near Elgin and home.

“I did not have to change my lifestyle to pursue this. I didn’t have to live in DeKalb. I just had to stay right here, and nothing really had to change,” Brady said. “It was a pretty easy transition from ECC to NIU.”

NIU Department of Curriculum and Instruction coursework offered immediate applications at UPS, such as the importance of positive reinforcement and explaining concepts in detail.

He also gained valuable knowledge and preparation for the fifth- or sixth-grade classrooms where he plans to teach.

“During that time period, kids are going through a lot of things, and I want to help nurture kids during those transition times,” said Brady, who student-taught at **Heritage Elementary School** in Streamwood.

“I got the most out of the social-emotional learning content,” he added. “It’s not something that is really talked about when you look at the profession; what you might be going through within the classroom, what they kids might be going through in their own lives. We were able to look at things from a cultural lens – a familial lens – and it prepared me for this career with things that I otherwise wouldn’t have.”



Jocelynne Escontrias

Escontrias said she is excited to begin teaching and grateful for the ability to do so.

“I come from a place where I would seek rides all the time, so I was really struggling to find my way,” Escontrias said. “‘How am I going to get out of community college and find a university that’s close? How am I going to do any of that when it’s not possible because I’m sharing a car, or I need to ask for a ride?’ And this wonderful opportunity came up. Dr. Raval mentioned it, I applied, and I was so lucky to get in.”

Her student-teaching with fifth-graders at Highland Elementary School taught her patience, slang and even TikTok. It also proved to her that her NIU curriculum “blends so flawlessly” into practice and “just feels so natural over time.”

She appreciated the support of faculty who were always happy to answer her questions without judgement – and of her family.

“I’m first-generation,” she said. “Growing up, they didn’t expect me to go after high school, even though I was a good student. But I was really determined, and they supported me, and I’m really thankful that I can make them proud.”

TOVAR ALSO IS A first-generation college student who is happy to set a positive example for her brother, Brian.



Jennifer Tovar

PLEDGE came “at the right time,” she said, relieving her concerns about commuting or living away from home.

Meanwhile, she added, her preparation “was amazing” as was her cooperating teacher at **Garfield Elementary School**.

“I learned that classroom management is very important at the beginning of the year for any new teacher as well as having a routine,” Tovar said. “I loved working with the kids. I built a relationship with them, and I’m going to miss them a lot because it’s my first year. I just bonded with them so well, and I hope I have that next year as well.”

For Lauritzen, benefits of PLEDGE included the “cohort of folks who really made the experience collaborative” and the group chat that kept those classmates connected electronically.

Her NIU coursework provided “the backbones of what I need to know,” she said, including the rationale behind teaching concepts and how to turn theory into practice for effective instruction.

She especially appreciated content related to English Language Learners and “being able to work with diverse populations of students: I’m fortunate to be in Elgin, which is filled with people from different backgrounds and different races. It’s nice to be in U-46.”



Danielle Lauritzen

Lauritzen plans to teach in the upper grades of elementary school.

“The conversations you can have with them are pretty interesting because they have some grasp of what the world really looks like, and sometimes you can take those ideas they have and mold them or include them within your work as a teacher,” she said.

At the same time, she has learned, it’s important to examine data about students to better understand their strengths and struggles. It’s important to set high expectations – a growth mindset of trying and learning – and to accompany that with support.

“Being able to use those factors was very important to my cooperating teacher, and that’s something she made as a big emphasis on me,” Lauritzen said. “You need to use what the kids have under their belts before you can even think about what you bring to the table.”

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News

The return of Tess Evans after the first five games gives Bartlett guarded optimism. And about her first name? ‘It’s fast to say.’ --- 5/16/2022

By Patrick Z. McGavin for Aurora Beacon-News



Bartlett's Tess Evans (10) congratulates teammate Viviana Alba (11) after Alba scored against East Aurora during the first half of an Upstate Eight Conference game on Wednesday, May 11, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

Bartlett's Tess Evans has the answer to the famous “what’s in a name” question posed by Shakespeare in “Romeo and Juliet.”

She’s listed on the roster as Tessa.

Evans, however, prefers the shorter and quicker Tess, much like the hero in the Thomas Hardy novel, “Tess of the d’Urbervilles.”

Her teammates, according to senior defender Sabrina Fowler, also like it that way.

“It’s faster to say and easier to get her attention on the field,” Fowler said.



Bartlett's Tess Evans (10) tries to get past East Aurora's Arizbeth Sanchez (6) during the first half of an Upstate Eight Conference game on Wednesday, May 11, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

Regardless of how she is addressed, Evans grabs everybody's attention on the soccer field. Her competitive spirit and outgoing personality creates an identity for Bartlett.

Evans, a senior midfielder and Barry recruit, plays with a brash exuberance that radiates in all directions. She perfectly strikes the balances between being playful and intense.

"She is definitely outgoing as a person and that reflects on the field," Fowler said. "We're always laughing, always ready to play. She is very good at being serious when she needs to be."

Guarding Tess is not so easy, however. She's an attacking midfielder with a seriousness of purpose and versatility to her game.

"I'm great at shooting from distance," Evans said. "I feel like I'm a very technical player. I have a lot of foot skills and I use that ability to give me some time and space.

"I just love slotting balls for teammates to run on to. If they don't get it, then I get the ball back and get a shot."

As a central midfielder, Evans needs to be the linchpin of the attack.

Evans combines a physical, tactical presence with a solid first touch. She's excellent with the ball at both feet. The attack runs through and off her.



Bartlett's Tess Evans (10) reacts against East Aurora during the second half of an Upstate Eight Conference game on Wednesday, May 11, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

“The coaches have been very hard on me about moving the ball quicker,” Evans said. “I have been on the varsity since my freshman year. A lot of the seniors were big and strong and I was learning how to adapt.

“Maybe I could dribble through three players in club soccer. In high school, the game is about learning how to use your teammates more, having more possession time and getting the ball back.”

Bartlett felt the absence of Evans when she missed the first five games of the season. The team started with a 1-3-1 record.

Following her return, Bartlett (10-8-2, 8-0-1) closed out the season on a 9-5-1 run and sharing the Upstate Eight Conference title with Glenbard East.

As a two-way force, Evans was a crucial reason the Hawks scored more goals in conference than any other team. They also had eight shutouts, conceding just one goal in nine games.

In the regular season, Evans finished with three goals and two assists.

“She’s very dynamic on the ball,” Fowler said of Evans. “She is great at moving on and off, passing and getting her head up

“It’s great to have a wonderful player like her in the middle, especially who will come back on defense.”



Bartlett's Tess Evans (10) tries to control the ball in front of East Aurora's Arizbeth Sanchez (6) during the first half of an Upstate Eight Conference game on Wednesday, May 11, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / The Beacon-News)

Evans also has a deep emotional connection to the game. Older sister Tabitha, a 2019 Bartlett graduate, had her promising career cut short by injury and illness.

Tabitha was her entry point to the game. Tess tries to play for her.

But at the same time, Tess' game also speaks for itself.

"She's always capable of making something out of nothing," [Bartlett coach Vince Revak](#) said. "Whenever our team needed it, we can always count on her to be a catalyst for our offense.

"It will be difficult to replace Tess — she has been amazing for Bartlett. Four years have passed far too quickly."