WATERLOO — Cynthia d’Lamant wanted desperately to jump-start her college education in 2007 when she moved to the Cedar Valley from Florida.

Pregnant and trying to work through past college debt, she struggled to move forward with her goals. Her dad and stepmom, who were the initial draw to the area, provided support during the pregnancy and early stages of motherhood, along with her then-boyfriend.

But it wasn’t until d’Lamant walked into the University of Northern Iowa’s Center for Urban Education that she figured out how to get back into college. It’s where she met Nikole Dillard, assistant director of UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center. The federally funded program works with adults who are low-income or first-generation college students in starting or returning to post-secondary education.

“A lot of students that we work with, there are barriers,” said Dillard, including financial issues. That was the case with d’Lamant.

“I had some school loans. I tried to go to school several times,” she said, first in New Mexico and later in Florida. “Nikole was instrumental in helping me clean that up.”
Her education began at Hawkeye Community College and continued later when she transferred to UNI in Cedar Falls. But difficult personal situations slowed the progress of d’Lamant, who is now 48. She crossed the stage in December, though, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in movement and exercise science.

She had a strong start, enrolling full-time at Hawkeye in 2008 — the same year her son was born. Having a baby and maintaining a college schedule “is definitely a challenge,” said d’Lamant. “I did my best to create an environment where I could still go to school.”

She studied photography and journalism during two years at Hawkeye, earning an associate’s degree in 2010. UNI-CUE staff encouraged d’Lamant to use Hawkeye’s free tutoring center, which was important to her success in some classes.

“That’s part of what we do is lead people to the resources on their individual campus,” said Dillard.

Due to an unhappy relationship with her son’s father, d’Lamant decided to move back to Dallas, Texas, where she had grown up and her mom still lived. Once there, she planned to complete a bachelor’s degree at the University of Texas.

However, she didn’t have the kind of resources that are available through UNI-CUE. “The complexities of trying to raise a very young child and trying to educate yourself with no guidance” proved too difficult, said D’Lamant. “I had to stop school and work full-time.”

Eventually, she met and married her husband, whom she later realized had serious alcohol and drug addiction problems.

“Addicts don’t tell you they’re addicts — ever,” said d’Lamant. “So I found myself where I was now married to an addict and his problems became so much bigger than my problems were. It was completely into survival mode, and not my survival.”

Her husband’s issues led to legal troubles and time in jail. Before he went through the legal process, though, d’Lamant decided it was time to return to a more stable life in Waterloo, which her husband joined prior to being locked up.
“He was in jail the entirety, basically, of 2016,” she said. He moved to a Dallas halfway house for the first part of 2017 and then, at her insistence, to a sober living house.

Meanwhile, she was going to UNI part-time and working full-time as the manager of a spa. But in the fall of 2016, she learned her mom had an inoperable brain tumor and needed care. So d’Lamant quit her job and classes, arranged for her son to live with his grandfather, and went to take care of her mother in Dallas during the four months before she died on Dec. 31.

“After mom died, I decided to go back to school full-time,” she said. In addition, d’Lamant filed for divorce from her husband, who was still in Texas. But phone contact between the two continued, and she couldn’t completely escape from his problems.

On Jan. 20, 2018, he killed himself. “I was on the phone with him when it occurred,” she said. D’Lamant was nearly finished at the University of Northern Iowa, but “I couldn’t handle the pressure of that last semester” after the suicide.

She used UNI’s free mental health and counseling services and decided to scale back her studies. Last fall, she took the final class and completed an internship. D’Lamant also finished her senior project, planning a pop-up health fair that was held in downtown Cedar Falls.

She is now looking at online master’s degree programs in counseling or social work and planning to move back to Dallas with her son, who is 11.

D’Lamant continues to credit UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center for the help and guidance it provided through the difficulties she faced while earning a degree. It was “paramount to my success as a student and as a parent and as a woman and as a mother,” she said.

At times, she admitted, “it was incredibly difficult to get that grit and finish.” But d’Lamant was able to move ahead, thanks to the support available and her own determination.

“Everybody has choices,” she said, “you just have to want it bad enough.”