UNI-CUE program helps man turn life around

Andrew Wind    Jun 12, 2017

WATERLOO — An effort to sort out a student loan default at the University of Northern Iowa Center for Urban Education took a surprising turn for Jon Ramon.

In March 2016, he went downtown to UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center and worked with counselor Constance McGovern on filling out online forms.

“Basically, I came down here because I needed to get assistance with my student loans,” said the 34-year-old Waterloo man. “By the end of the day I had applied to Hawkeye (Community College) and Upper Iowa (University).”

He later chose to enroll in Hawkeye’s two-year computer numerical control machining and tool-making technology degree starting last fall.

“It wasn’t even in my thoughts to get back into college,” said Ramon. “And I left here thinking, ‘Wow, that was like magic.’”

The federally funded EOC — one of 126 similar programs across the country — helps people 19 and older overcome barriers to education, particularly those who are first-generation college students or from low-income families. Staff at the center can assist with enrolling in high school equivalency degree programs or post secondary institutions. Career planning, filling out college and financial aid applications, finding scholarships, getting out of default, transferring to a new college or re-enrolling in college are among the services provided.

Kathy Martin, director of UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center, said the programs have been targeted for elimination in President Trump’s 2018 budget.
“I think for this area it’s important that adults have access to a program that has such an array of services,” she said. “Nobody else in the area does what we’re able to do.”

The services were important for Ramon.

“I would say any obstacles that you feel are in your way for bettering your life, these people are here to clear those hurdles, to put you in a position to succeed,” he said. “I feel like they want me to succeed as much as I want to succeed. I don’t think I could’ve gotten this far without them, at least not this quickly.”

Ramon initially came to the EOC seeking loan forgiveness. He thought it was a possibility since he is disabled. “I’m on disability because I got into a car accident and pretty much mangled my arm,” he said.

In the 2007 crash, he lost control of the car, hit a bridge and rolled over. His arm ended up pinned between the car’s open window and the road. Ramon went through numerous surgeries and doctors were able to repair the arm rather than amputate it.

“It took me a good year before I could even use it, and now it doesn’t function 100 percent,” he said, noting the arm also doesn’t stop him from doing much.

McGovern discouraged seeking forgiveness of the old loans and helped him work through the process to start repaying them. Then they started talking about getting him back into college.

The Hampton native earned an associate’s degree at Mason City’s North Iowa Area Community College in 2011 and began working on a business degree from Buena Vista University through a program on the NIACC campus.

But in December 2011, Ramon was charged with felony assault on a police officer. Eventually, he pleaded guilty and was sent to prison at the Fort Dodge Correctional Facility.
“I ended up being incarcerated 15 months,” said Ramon, who was released in March 2015. “I’d say it took 3 1/2 years out of my life.”

His self-destructive behaviors had started long before the arrest, though. “I had problems with substance abuse and alcohol abuse,” said Ramon. After the car crash, which involved drunken driving, “it just got worse and worse.”

Prison stopped all that. “My life was kind of in a slow downward spiral until I went to prison,” he noted. “Prison was a good thing in that aspect.”

Ramon decided to make a change, citing his Christian faith as a factor. “With grace, you can be freed from your sins; you can start a new life,” he said.

After being released, Ramon did that, moving to Waterloo where his mom and sister’s family live. He found a job at a restaurant and enrolled in a CNC machining certification class through Hawkeye and Iowa Workforce Development.

That didn’t lead to a job, but he started thinking about pursuing a career in the field. UNI-CUE’s Educational Opportunity Center helped clear the way for him to enroll in Hawkeye’s full program.

CNC machining uses computer programming to design and cut out components as part of the manufacturing process. Annual wages in the field typically start at $30,000, according to Hawkeye.

“What I like about it, you’ve got to use your brain and you get to use your hands,” said Ramon. “I just feel like the potential to make a good living is there.”