

Exemplifiers of USU Eastern

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The Utah House of Representatives 61st Legislature in general session with three USU Eastern alumni in House Changers, including Brad King, Sophia DiCaro and Rich Cunningham.

Utah State University Eastern is well represented in the Utah House of Representatives with three of its alumni - Brad King, Sophia DiCaro and Rich Cunningham - serving as elected members.

Even though the 2015 general session of the 61st Legislature ended at midnight March 12, these lawmakers continue as representatives throughout the year. So, too, does their representation of the college - as with all alumni.

As students of the former College of Eastern Utah, they got along well with classmates and worked hard. Overall, good, everyday students. What they have done with their lives since then has proven to be exceptional. So what can college students learn today from these alumni to ensure that they, too, become exemplary?

First, appreciate what you have at USU Eastern. All three expressed how much they value their start at CEU. A milestone and stepping stone, i how DiCaro describes it. The freshman lawmaker was elected to

represent West Valley's District 31 last November. She graduated from USU Eastern in 1998 and eventually wound up in the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. For 13 years she worked in the Economic Development Office and the State Budget Office, including as deputy director of the Governor's Office of Economic Development.

Bill Clinton was president when she was at CEU and the Monica Lewinsky affair was all the talk. She was a quiet and focused student who enjoyed her small classes and soaked in as much as she could. She liked sitting on the front row. She still does. She occupies the second row from the front in House chambers.

The busy life DiCaro leads as a mother of two boys and a girl is nothing new either. She has always been busy. While at CEU, she held down three jobs: dishwasher, assistant manager at Arby's and cashier at Walmart She even did a stint as a receptionist for a mining equipment company in Price.

What makes the college especially dear to her is that it was the place where she and her sister, Maria, began their higher education pursuits and it was where Yoshie, her Japanese-born mother, who struggled with English, also attended.

Although her mother never lived to complete a degree, DiCaro takes a great deal of pride in recognizing that she chose to return to school, knowing it was never easy for her. The thought of her mom sitting in some of the same classrooms learning new things, trying to better herself, is touching to DiCaro. Her mother's display of quiet courage and tenacity continues to inspire her. They are characteristics she now equates with the college.

Family roots run deep throughout the institution. It has been a home away from home for most of Brad King's life, who even today, lives only a few steps away from campus. It is where his father La Veil King taught life sciences for 34 years; where his three children graduated; where his brother Mike King, former interim president of the college, is still teaching.

"Your institution is really your nursing mother, as it were," he said. "By keeping the rules and doing things that bring honor to your alma mater, it is a good way to keep yourself pointed in the right direction."

King recently retired from USU Eastern as vice chancellor of institutional advancement and administrative services. He is the senior member of the three state representatives, and the sole Democrat. He is now in his second round

as a legislator following a successful bid this past fall. He was first elected in 1996 when DiCaro was just starting at CEU. He and Cunningham were students at the college at about the same time in the late 1970s when the turmoil of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal was still fresh on everyone's minds. As a legislator and former minority house leader, King prefers to sit on the back row in the House chambers, just as he always chose to sit in the rear of class at college. Not that he doesn't participate, it's just that he's always liked the vantage point of being in the back, he said.

And just as he loves the variety of topics and lively debate today in the legislature, he enjoyed college for the same reason. Taking lots of different classes on a variety of topics always interested him. He never really liked to be tied down to just one subject.

"As a legislator, I'm talking about transportation issues in the morning, and in the afternoon, business and labor issues," he said. "I like that kind of variety. It feels really very much the same as it did in school. It's interesting to hear people talk and to learn about what they think."

DiCaro pointed out that learning and understanding different viewpoints is a precursor of respect.

One may not agree with what is being said, "but if you can at least respectfully disagree, you'll make a lot more progress than if you just put each other down and disagree and shut each other out."

Showing genuine respect for others and their opinions, even if they are different from yours, was a strong common thread among all three legislators. "I was taught to respect all people regardless of who they are," Cunningham said. "Being raised in Carbon County, you've got a mix of Heinz 57, be it Greeks, Italians, Catholics or Mormons; it did not matter who you were and, I think in life, you have to be the same way. If you respect people, you respect the institutions and the beliefs that are there."

Cunningham has represented South Jordan's District 50 since 2013. Born in Price, he attended CEU from 1978-79. He thrived in the college's welding program that landed a job with a local mining company that eventually sent him east to study where he graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Today he is a financial services investment advisor and puts his expertise to work as a legislator specializing in issues involving pensions, insurance and securities.

Although he no longer wields a blowtorch, Cunningham continues to weld together dreams and goals. It helped him achieve success in his personal and political careers. It's also what he advises USU Eastern students to pay attention to. Write down your dreams and goals. Read them daily and give them to somebody else to make you accountable, he said.

"The legislature is absolutely no different than life," he said. "Up there, you'd better know your goals and prioritize them or you'll get eaten up." For students, that means knowing what they need to do to graduate, DiCaro said.

"What's the map to get to the next phase?" she said. "You need to know what the map is so that you can use your time there effectively. Don't take it for granted. So too, know what the rules are when you go in."

That means spending adequate time reading your class syllabus BEFORE the first day of class, King said.

"Know what the expectations are," he said. "Pay attention to the verbal hints your professor gives you. If you want to be successful in college, you need to know what those expectations are and then you need to meet them. Those are the rules you are going to be judged by."

And, finally, know what your friends represent to you in your life. Choose them wisely.

"You will become who you surround yourself with on a daily basis," Cunningham said. "I learned early in my career and life that if you want to be successful, hang around successful people. If you want to be average and mediocre, guess what?"

~ John DeVilbiss