

Diligent determination Janelle Lucksavage overcomes challenges in becoming physical therapist

By Crystal Baily

Becoming a physical therapist and raising two young children, with a third on the way, all while her husband has been stationed with the U.S. Army several hundred miles away could be described as overwhelming.

But Janelle Lucksavage, who received her doctoral degree May 7, has thrived under the challenges.

"Her tenacity and diligence in overcoming all the issues she's had are a great example of what can be done with determination," said Dr. Walt Jenkins, interim chairman of the Department of Physical Therapy at East Carolina University.

She has been married 10 years to Phil Lucksavage, a medical lab technician and career active duty officer. They've known each other since seventh grade where they grew up in Asheville. The couple has two children, Zoie, 7, and Zane, 6, with another due in June. Phil Lucksavage has been stationed in Philadelphia for more than a year, but was actually deployed to Iraq for 16 months when she first came to ECU.

"It's obvious her time has been limited to spend with us, which means she has had to spend extra time on material when her children are in bed to devote to our curriculum," Jenkins said. "She's never been late. She's never been absent. She's never used her family

as an excuse for anything. She's always delivered what she was supposed to."

Physical therapy is a three-year, 106-semester-hour program that includes 32 weeks of clinical education. Students are in class 30 hours a week and they must spend an equal amount or more outside of class on group projects, preparation or research. The highly competitive program only accepts 30 students each year.

"Returning to school full-time with two young kids and alone was a big challenge, and harder than I thought it would be," Janelle Lucksavage said. "I had to re-learn to study and schedule my time."

Janelle Lucksavage graduated from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in sociology, and soon began working as a civilian at the military's Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine in Maryland, where her husband was stationed at the time. "They have all disciplines working together to study the health and wellness of soldiers," she said. There, she met a physical therapist whom she began shadowing and volunteering at various clinics. She liked the work.

"It took me several years to go back and take the science-based pre-requisition classes to apply to PT school," Janelle Lucksavage said.

While living in Kansas due to another military transfer at the time, she applied to ECU. An interview led to an invitation to attend, and she began classes in May 2007.

She credits her husband's military service with her ability to return to school for another degree.

"Being separated is hard, but with two children, it is the only way I could have gone back to school," Janelle Lucksavage said. "I am lucky he has a steady job with such good benefits and salary or I could not have done this, even with financial aid."

She was awarded a \$1,000 merit-based Patriot Scholarship, established recently in the College of Allied Health Sciences specifically for military members or veterans, or their spouses or children. She also received a \$2,500 military-affiliated scholarship.

Her husband has enough flexibility in his job that allows him to visit Greenville twice a month and stay four or five days at a time. They are involved with their children's extracurricular activities like gymnastics, soccer and tennis, or traveling to favorite spots like Charleston or Myrtle Beach. When he is away, they talk several times a day and webcam several times a week, she said.

"When he was in Iraq, we still did webcam daily because he had Internet in his room," she said.

She has had support from her parents and her husband's parents, who have helped care for the children, especially during clinicals. Faculty and classmates also have been encouraging, hosting a baby shower this spring.

"In her case, given the task she has of raising her family and also being a student, there is little room for self, and very little room for error," Jenkins said. "Her success is a real celebration of her as a person."

While the Lucksavages will soon be merging two households into one again, she will take her board certification exams and enjoy a few months off before re-entering the workforce in 2011.

"I think she'll be able to do what she wants to do," Jenkins said. "Anyone who goes through our curriculum will, and I can put a plus, plus on that for her." ☺

Janelle Lucksavage is the ultimate multi-tasker as mom, student and military wife.