

Nontraditional student earns national honor

By Marsha Shoemaker

For Sarah Bersie, entering SCSU's Communications Disorders graduate program at age 30 was the beginning of a radically different – and highly successful – new chapter in her life.

When she came to SCSU, Bersie had an undergraduate degree in English, experience in the advertising field and a husband and two young children at home. Juggling a busy home life and a 70-mile commute to class and studies in a new field might have been daunting to some. But not this student. Not only did she

earn her master's degree, she was awarded the SCSU Distinguished Thesis Award for 1999, and she became a speech language pathologist for Monticello and St. Michael-Albertville school districts.

And the accolades haven't stopped. On April 26 in Chicago, Bersie was honored with the Distinguished Thesis Award from the Midwestern Association of Graduate Schools, an organization of about 300 colleges and universities in the Midwestern United States and Canada. Nearly a third of them submitted theses, and Bersie's was judged the best.

Margery Whites, the Communications Disorders faculty member who worked with Bersie on her thesis, has nothing but praise for her former student. "In this thesis project, she took the kernel of an idea and ran with it. She was able to work independently, so to mentor her through this was a real pleasure."

Bersie, who began taking classes in her new field at the University of Minnesota, transferred to the SCSU graduate program at the urging of fellow students who pointed out the benefits of the St. Cloud program, which included an on-site language and hearing clinic. "That's a wonderful student opportunity to start to see your first clients in a supervised environment," she said. "My training was second to none. But honestly, I knew that before I started there because I talked to people in the field who said they prefer employees from SCSU."

The program was especially accommodating to her children, Bersie said. "It was an absolutely wonderful program to go through as a nontraditional student. I had the kids on campus several times and the professors went out of their way to learn their names and make them feel welcome."

She credits her professors for a good share of her success. "I really felt like the professors in this program have a vested interest in our futures," Bersie said. "They want us to succeed."

Although Bersie has graduated and is employed, Whites continues to work with her to bring the award-winning thesis to the attention of experts in her field. Titled, "Assessing the Vocabulary Definitions of Normally-Developing Children: A Comparison of Three Scoring Methods," the thesis compares different methods of assessing how children define vocabulary words and asserts that the traditional method may not be the best. She and Whites presented her findings at a speech pathology convention in November in San Francisco, and Whites continues to work with her on getting her thesis findings published.



Sarah Bersie