

Unusual Backstory, Uncommon Resolve Distinguishes Scholarship Winner



BY DAN SADOWSKY

Tirzah Krabill isn't the only student in her class who took a roundabout route from high school to OHSU's Ashland campus. But the 27-year-old's path might qualify as the most circuitous.

At age 19, Krabill and her boyfriend, Dave Shantie, packed up their belongings and their three dogs and drove across the U.S. For three years, they lived as drifters, sleeping most nights in their vehicle and scraping by on odd jobs and sales of Krabill's handmade clothing and jewelry. Along the way, they rafted in Wisconsin, dug for crystals in Arkansas and took in the red-rock landscapes of Arizona, returning only occasionally to their mothers' homes in Seattle and Eugene.

Krabill, an "A" student from a stable home, says her wanderlust came from the adventure stories of street kids that frequented the University District Taco Bell in Seattle, where she worked during high school. "I just wanted to see what was out there."

The three-year odyssey ended in 2001, when Tirzah got pregnant and the couple moved to Eugene. A first-trimester miscarriage left her devastated; she badly wanted the child. But amid the heartbreak, she saw a chance to gain her financial footing before getting pregnant again.

"Basically, I figured this was my second chance to do it the right way," she says.

She decided to go to school to be a midwife. She'd met too many pregnant girls on the streets who didn't have the resources, the information or sometimes the will to give birth to a healthy baby.

And she already had a nurse's empathy. As a child, whenever her mom fell ill, Krabill would eagerly fetch a cool washcloth, an extra towel or a bowl of applesauce to comfort her. "She used to call me her little nurse," says Krabill.

After filling prerequisites at Lane Community College for nearly three years, Krabill was accepted into OHSU's bache-

lor's degree nursing program in 2005. To help defray costs, she was awarded a \$5,000 scholarship from the Daniel and Mary Lou Shepard Family Education Trust.

At OHSU, Krabill, who wears her own colorful, hand sewn clothing and lives off the electrical grid in a 10-foot-by-40-foot trailer on Mt. Ashland, stands out as "kind of hippie," says friend and classmate Cerisa Niskanen. Yet she's also distinguished herself as someone with extraordinary compassion and commitment.

"Tirzah is just naturally open to people," Niskanen says. "I think her experience has influenced who she is and the way she approaches nursing."

"She's very much her own person," adds Instructor Lori Lind, MS, RN, "in a way that makes people easy to connect with her because she is so real."

After graduation, Krabill wants to practice in an underserved rural community and "focus on people who can't afford healthcare." She says she'd like to offer the same kind of care she received at a free clinic in Seattle, where she used to visit when she fell ill or needed health care.

"They wanted to know about me, my situation, how I was coping mentally," she says. "It wasn't just, 'Oh, you're sick, here's some medicine, now go away,' which is how it is a lot of times when you don't have money."

Eventually, Krabill wants to widen her rural clientele by becoming a family nurse practitioner. Starting her own family might come first. Krabill and Shantie, who fights wildland fires and works at Mt. Ashland ski resort, plan to marry sometime around next year's graduation.

Krabill would be the first to agree that not long ago, her life was a bit aimless. But these days, it seems she knows exactly where she wants to go.