

Midstate gala lauds scholarly BC3 sophs

April 3, 2017



Dr. Nick Neupauer, president of Butler County Community College, is shown with BC3 sophomores Tarah Schmidt, left, of Parker, and Lauren Denny, of Butler, at an April 3, 2017, banquet in Camp Hill recognizing their selection to the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team.

(Camp Hill, PA) Tarah Schmidt scans a vast banquet room softly illuminated by scallop-shell wall sconces. Under the diffused glow of dimly lit chandeliers, tea light flames wiggle atop octagon-shaped, beveled mirrors as centerpieces on each of 37 tables.

Across a ballroom slowly filling with 275 guests, and with anticipation, stands fellow Butler County Community College sophomore Lauren Denny.

“I,” Denny says above the increasing din, above the high-pitched squeaks of a harmonica solo by the Jazz Me Rhythm & Blues Band’s Mitch Gregory, “have never been at an event like this.”

“This” is what Schmidt would also describe as the highlight of her BC3 career: Like Denny, being one of 49 members of Phi Theta Kappa selected by the state’s 14 community colleges to the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team.

Their selections include invitations to this gala halfway across Pennsylvania from the BC3 campus where Schmidt and Denny have earned accolades with their achievements inside and outside of the classroom.

Their selections also include a full-tuition scholarship to any one of the 14 State System of Higher Education institutions.

“It is pretty neat to experience something when you are with people who have the same interests as you and are really passionate about continuing their education and learning as much as they can,” Denny says. “You are surrounded by people here who really care about community colleges. To be selected is just incredible. This is an opportunity of a lifetime.”



“We are all going places”

Schmidt and Denny will later walk across the stage as their photograph is projected onto large screens, shake the hand BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer, and receive a framed certificate recognizing their inclusion on the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team.

Lauren Denny, of Butler, a BC3 sophomore early childhood education major, crosses a ballroom in Camp Hill on April 3, 2017, to receive a certificate from BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer recognizing her selection to the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team.

“It is exciting and an honor, and definitely commendable for every student here because we are all going places,” Schmidt says.

Some of the students about to be lauded are first-generation collegians, some first-generation Americans. Some overcame learning disabilities and visual tracking disorders, some blindness. All belong to Phi Theta Kappa, a prestigious international academic honor society that has 3.2 million members in nine nations, all of whom must have at least a 3.5 grade-point average.

Schmidt and Denny’s selections to the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team were based largely on essays they wrote that illustrate the connection between what they learned inside the classroom and an outside-the-classroom experience, says Morgan Rizzardi, who with Arlene Gardopée serves as an adviser to Rho Phi, BC3’s chapter of Phi Theta Kappa.

“A warm feeling in my heart”

Schmidt, of Parker, is pursuing associate degrees in psychology and social work; and Denny, of Butler, early childhood education.

The “first time” she truly saw the world differently was in the fall of 2015, Schmidt wrote in her endeavor essay.

The 23-year-old traveled to Kentucky that November to accumulate volunteer hours needed for a social work class project and, at least initially, “because it was a chance to travel.”

“Little did I know it would entirely change my perception of society.”

It was in Louisville where she helped prepare a Thanksgiving dinner for those in need at the Wayside Christian Mission, which she describes as a hotel, recovery home and homeless shelter “all in one.”

For four days she helped at Wayside, in its kitchen cutting vegetables, sorting donuts and serving lunch to people who were “off the streets”; in its thrift store, organizing clothes; and in its restaurant, wrapping silverware.

“Although the tasks seemed irritating and insignificant to some, it put such a warm feeling in my heart,” she wrote. “Every hand was counted on to make the Thanksgiving dinner possible.”



Tarah Schmidt, of Parker, a BC3 sophomore psychology major, crosses a ballroom in Camp Hill on April 3, 2017, to receive a certificate from BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer recognizing her selection to the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team.

“It taught me the true values of life”

Although she and fellow volunteers had collected nearly 200 winter coats prior to arriving in Louisville, none would fit a man who needed a size 4XL.

“We didn’t have one with us,” Schmidt wrote.

So she and others went to a nearby department store and “found him the perfect 4XL winter coat. We wrote a little note with it and placed the coat at the (Wayside) hotel where we knew he would be sure to get it. We didn’t get to see his reaction, but quite frankly we didn’t need to.”

Her learning experience in Kentucky, she wrote, was “inspiring” and “life-changing.”

“It taught me the true values of life and, ultimately, Thanksgiving.”

Witnessing results of education “first-hand”

As a BC3 student, Denny is “fascinated by children’s development of new and abstract skills,” she wrote in her endeavor essay. As a musician, Denny wanted to open her own studio in Butler, where she would teach 9- to 13-year-olds how to play the flute.

She promoted enrollment in her new business by contacting local music directors, distributing flyers and by word-of-mouth. Two young girls were the first to join her studio at May's Music Shoppe in Butler.

"As I began lessons, I applied a lot of child-related information to my instructional methods," Denny wrote. "I teach one-on-one lessons, which gives me the opportunity to individualize each child's lesson."

Denny, 20, recorded each child's development and strengths weekly, and was amazed at how quickly her students – some of whom initially could not play one note – learned the flute. She was further amazed when she received more calls from more potential students.

"I was ecstatic!" she wrote. "Not only was I learning about the child's brain and learning, creative experiences that benefit children, and motivational techniques, I was witnessing them first-hand."

"My students have gained new excitement"

Her education classes at BC3, she wrote, "taught me that I must have effective communication, behavior management and professionalism. ... In a general education classroom, teachers must keep their children motivated and eager to learn."

She did so by modifying an incentive system with her flute students.

"It is based on their home practice time and lesson performance," Denny wrote. "Children are rewarded for preparing material and putting effort into their lesson. My students have gained new excitement about playing."

Implementing her new methods provided to her multiple ways in which to present new information for different types of learners.

"The valuable information I have been taught in my college classes has allowed me to develop a successful studio," she wrote. "I remain motivated to use my knowledge to inspire others."

BC3 students embody "community"

Among those inspired by Schmidt and Denny are Neupauer, Rizzardi and Gardopoe.

"Tarah is amazing," Neupauer says. "I recently wrote her a letter of recommendation and had the chance to read her resume. Working while taking a full load, being involved in a Phi Theta Kappa leadership position and excelling in the classroom – it was just incredible. Lauren symbolizes our students. She is hard-working, dedicated, balances a ton inside the classroom and out, and excels. We are so proud."

“Tarah and Lauren were selected for the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team for not only their outstanding academic achievement, but also for truly embodying the word ‘community,’ which is BC3’s middle name,” said Rizzardi, BC3’s associate director of admissions.

Denny has an “entrepreneurial spirit” with her own studio, teaching flute lessons, working with parents and communicating with students.

“She has a very strong passion for music,” Rizzardi says. “She has connected her love of working with children as well as her love of music together.”

Rho Phi each year submits two students’ names for inclusion on the All-Pennsylvania Academic Team after examining their applications, Rizzardi says.

That Phi Theta Kappa application asks specific questions about the students’ academics, their involvement on campus – especially within the honor society – and their community service, Rizzardi says.

Schmidt has a passion for helping others, Rizzardi says, an internal fire stoked by her social work classes at BC3.

“When she went down to Kentucky with the group, she used all of the skills that she learned in psychology and social work to be able to help some families at their worst over Thanksgiving, and giving up her own Thanksgiving to be able to serve for them.”

Denny’s work outside the classroom with children in her music studio is extraordinary, Gardopee says.

“We were most impressed at how she, at such a young age, was able to take the skills she learned at BC3 and directly apply them to an endeavor that spoke to her passion for both music and education.”

“I am proud to be her mother”

Schmidt, a 2012 Moniteau High School graduate and Rho Phi vice president, meanders through the ballroom tables to join her mother, June Schmidt, of Parker.

“It sure is a big night for her,” June Schmidt says. “I am very proud of her. It just seems like things are going boom, boom, boom, falling in place for her this year. I hope it keeps going for her. I am proud to be her mother.”

Mike and Vicki Denny – BC3 graduates themselves who live in Butler – are equally proud of their daughter, the BC3 Executive Council president.

“She has a passion and she is not afraid to work,” Vicki Denny says.

“BC3 has nourished my love of learning”

It took a while for his daughter to consider the offers she received upon graduating in 2015 from Butler Area Senior High, Mike Denny says. Among them was BC3’s President’s Scholarship, a full-tuition award presented annually to students in the Top 10 percent of their graduating class at any of Butler County’s eight public high schools – Butler, Freeport, Karns City, Knoch, Mars, Moniteau, Seneca Valley or Slippery Rock – and who enroll at BC3 the following semester.

“BC3 became the one that made the most sense for her, economically and academically,” Mike Denny says.

Denny, who plans to become an elementary education or special education teacher – “whatever path my life takes” – was pleased with her decision to follow that first path to BC3.

“BC3 has nourished my love of learning,” she says. “I love BC3. I will graduate debt-free without using a loan.”

Her time at BC3, says Schmidt, who like Denny will continue her education at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, has been “life-changing.”

As is this evening.

“It is the highlight of my BC3 career so far,” Schmidt says. “There have been a lot of different highlights, but to be able to come here and enjoy this with other scholarly students as well, it definitely tops everything else so far.”

Schmidt and Denny were also selected to the 2017 Coca-Cola Community College Academic Team as Bronze Scholars and will receive \$1,000 scholarships. They were among 1,800 applicants for 150 Coca-Cola scholarships, whose recipients were selected based on scores earned in the All-USA Community College Academic Team competition.