Outstanding Graduates of the CEHS Class of 2024

05/21/2024

CEHS undergraduates enjoy the convocation ceremony

On Friday, May 4, 2024, graduates of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) participated in undergraduate and graduate convocation exercises with much celebration and fanfare. CEHS Endowed Dean Al Smith hosted both events. Representing eight departments, more than 1,100 undergraduates received degrees and more than 330 graduate students received either graduate or doctoral degrees.

Following are biographical sketches of three extraordinary undergraduates. All 1,430 alumni are confidently leaving Utah State University equipped with the necessary education, skills, and enthusiasm to impact the world for the better wherever they go.

Celina Larsen: CEHS Undergraduate Valedictorian
Celina Larsen, a double major in elementary education from the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) and special education from the Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling Department (SPERC), was named valedictorian for the Class of 2024.

“From the first time I met her, Celina lit up the room with her smile and unwavering dedication to becoming the best teacher there is,” says Laura Parrish, Larsen’s academic advisor in SPERC. “I admire her disposition for hard work and positive outlook. She is very well deserving of being the CEHS valedictorian.”

Although Larsen always knew she wanted to work with children, she didn’t know in what capacity until she was in high school. “I had the opportunity to take the TEAL 1010, Introduction to Education, concurrent enrollment class and I realized, ‘I love this!’” recalls Larsen. “Then I did peer tutoring the last trimester of my senior year and I realized I love special education, too. But then I couldn’t decide.”

Celina Larsen

During her first year at USU, Larsen struggled to decide which course of study to pursue. A conversation with Parrish opened her eyes to the possibility of completing a double major. “She told me it was only an extra year to do both majors. ‘Oh, my goodness,’ I thought. ‘I can do both?’ I’m super indecisive, so that’s how I ended up doing a double major,” she says.

Because Larsen was completing requirements for two majors, she spent much more time being mentored in early childhood classrooms than is typical. She ultimately participated in seven practicum experiences. In these experiences, Larsen’s discovered the importance of meeting all children where they are and working from there. Their progress, she says, “really depends on the child. They all make strides—you just have to figure out what growth looks like for that child. Sometimes it takes a minute to find out exactly what they can do.”

In Fall 2024, Larsen will join the faculty at Thomas Edison Charter School South, in Nibley, Utah, as the newest kindergarten teacher. “Kindergarten is my happy place,” she says. “I had a practicum in a kindergarten and worked with a magnificent teacher who taught me so much. Now I’m going into my own elementary classroom, but my special ed background is going to equip me to help the children who don’t quite qualify for special ed, but who have some specific needs.” For Larsen, it’s the best of both worlds.

“It can be hard sometimes, being a teacher, because things are so crazy. But the amazing thing for me is that every time I see a light come on in a child’s eyes when they learn a new concept—especially a child who is struggling—it always just gives me a little spark. And that spark really makes the hard days worth it.”

Kylen Aycock

Kylen Aycock: Undergraduate Valedictorian for Psychology

This year’s undergraduate valedictorian in psychology is anything but traditional. Four years ago, Kylen Aycock decided he wanted to pursue a bachelor’s degree in psychology. He comes from a family line of Aggies, with his mother, father, and sister all having earned bachelor’s degrees from USU. But Aycock’s path was slightly different than that of his family’s; he needed to pursue his degree through the online studies program. Aycock is a non-traditional student. He works a full-time job, is a full-time dad, and lives in the Uintah Basin, which is home to a USU Statewide Campus.

“For a long time, I never thought I would go to college. I decided four years ago that I was going to do it. Psychology was what I was most interested in, so I pursed that area,” says Aycock. “Many members of my family suffer from mental health disorders, which is where my main interest is in the field. I was also drawn to psychology because my mom was interested in it, too. She minored in psychology.”

In order to stay on track with his goal of graduating with his degree in four years, Aycock went to school during the summer. He recalls, “I let my schedule fall wherever it could fall. Sometimes I lost some sleep or took a lunch break to do my reading. Anywhere that I had free time, I would fit in some schoolwork.”

While in school, Aycock faced the unthinkable. His fifteen-year-old son was diagnosed with cancer. “Working on school became an outlet for me while I was at the hospital during his treatments,” recalls Aycock. “My son was proud of me for continuing my education and sometimes you need to get through hard things.” Sadly, Aycock’s son passed away last fall soon after his seventeenth birthday.

A bit of a silver lining came into Aycock’s life when he received notification that he had been nominated for valedictorian of the psychology department. His undergraduate advisor for psychology, Tressa Haderlie, commented, “As it became apparent that Kylen would be our department valedictorian, we were thrilled to see someone who has worked so hard, and with such dedication, through staggering challenges, rise to the top. He is so deserving of this honor.”

What’s next for Aycock? He says that he would like to take a year off. It’s been a difficult but rewarding four years. After his well-deserved break, he says, “I plan to go to graduate school. We need more people in the field. There has been a shortage of people in the mental health world, especially in rural Utah. “

Lucy Haslam: Outstanding Graduating Senior in Kinesiology

Lucy Haslam graduated last month with a 3.95 GPA in kinesiology with an emphasis in physical education teaching. In addition to her degree, Haslam received an endorsement in health education and elementary music education from the Utah State Board of Education. For the past four years, she has also played violin in the Cache Valley Symphony Orchestra and taught early-morning orchestra at Ellis Elementary School in Logan, Utah, through the Mountain West Strings Academy. Haslam’s many accomplishments have made her a perfect candidate for the 2024 Outstanding Graduating Senior, an honor bestowed by the faculty of the Department of Kinesiology and Health Science (KHS).

Lucy Haslam

“I can’t say enough about Lucy,” says Hilda Fronske, associate professor in KHS. “She is an athlete, scholar, and marvelous teacher full of energy and passion.”

According to Haslam, her degree is “a perfect mix of two things I love: teaching and sports.” Haslam has been playing sports her entire life, encouraged primarily by her maternal grandfather and her parents. She excels in soccer, basketball, track, and cross country, but admits, “I really love every sport.”

In an unusual turn of events, during her student teaching semester at Mount Logan Middle School in Logan, Utah, Haslam was offered a long-term substitute teaching job there. The position, which will last to the end of the 2023-2024 school year, has given her a real taste of her future work. “The best part of teaching is definitely the students,” says Haslam. “I love middle school. The students are so fun. Some of them are good at sports and some aren’t, but most of them are willing to try. It’s a fun stage of life. I love their quirkiness and excitement. And I love getting them excited about being active. My goal as a PE and health teacher is to help the students live an active lifestyle.”

Peter Mathesius, a principal lecturer in KHS, said, “Lucy is a remarkable student who has not only excelled in the physical education teaching curriculum but has also demonstrated exceptional dedication on multiple other levels. I personally observed her connect with an immigrant student who was lurking in the shadows, afraid to attend class. She kept coaxing the student to come into the gym and participate. He eventually joined the class, and she spoke to him in Spanish and reassured him. The most impressive thing was her quiet, calm demeanor. Lucy is special on many levels, and we were lucky to have her in the kinesiology program.”

Haslam adds, “At Mount Logan, I’ve had some really awesome opportunities. I’ve found that connecting with the students makes a big difference. If you respect them, they respect you.”

Looking forward, Haslam sees many new opportunities and a renewal of old favorites. This fall, she will audition to participate for a fifth year with the Cache Valley Symphony Orchestra and will return to her post teaching early-morning elementary orchestra with the Mountain West Strings Academy. She will also return to Mount Logan Middle School where she has been offered a full-time position doing precisely what she loves to do—teaching health and physical education to middle school students.