Global Learning

Ridgewater student (and Myanmar native) Mi Mi Shwe

How two students came from different sides of the world—and came to the same great conclusion about a Ridgewater education

Inside!

Why now is the time to invest in a college education

Health Information Technician program spotlight

How Dave Farber made it in the music industry

Special Insert! 2009 Viewbook

How did Tim Lebling find his way to Alaska and a dream career of working with injured wildlife?
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From the President

In this issue of the magazine, among other articles, you can read about our Health Information Technology program, the ongoing work of our Foundation, the results of a recent accreditation visit of our nursing program, and an award earned by some of the faculty in that same program. These stories all speak to the quality of our faculty and programs, but as is always the case, it's the stories about our students which provide the most powerful testimony to that quality.

For example, you’ll read about a veterinary technology student who has taken his skills north to Alaska, an audio technology program graduate who has created his own business, and a recent nursing graduate who has received a prestigious Robert Johnson Wood Fellowship. You’ll also get a special look at the experiences of two international students who came to Ridgewater from different countries and for different reasons. I think you’ll find all their stories not only inspiring, but also further evidence of the impact of Ridgewater College faculty and staff on people’s lives.

In a few weeks another graduating class at Ridgewater will cross the stage and receive their diplomas. I expect some of those graduates will one day become the subject of stories in this magazine. Regardless of whether or not that happens, however, I want to say, on behalf of all the faculty and staff at the college, congratulations and best wishes to you all!

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue of the magazine.

Douglas W. Allen
President

Learn this Summer!

Summer courses are a great way to earn college credits in a short amount of time. There’s still time to register, so if you need a couple of courses or have a child home from the university for the summer, log into www.ridgewater.edu to see what’s available!

Ridgewater College is published for alumni and friends of Ridgewater College, and for members of our surrounding communities.

Please visit us on the Web at www.ridgewater.edu for more information on our programs and educational offerings.

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Ridgewater College is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

Mission Statement
Ridgewater provides quality educational opportunities for diverse student learners in an inclusive, supportive, and accessible environment.
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Ridgewater student Mi Mi Shwe. Photo by Patrick Kelly.
Students in Ridgewater’s Health Information Technician program are learning the secrets to encrypting medical lingo—and jumping into one of the fastest-growing fields around.

By Jenny Sherman

Pneumonia: 486. Diabetes: 250.00. Salmonella: 003.8. Congestive heart failure: 428.0 (left or right side of the heart is 428.21 and 428.31, respectively).

What are these numbers? Codes for conditions that are used in medical records throughout the country. They turn doctor’s notes and diagnoses into a legible, numerical language that can be interpreted by anyone who needs access to patient records. They also allow those records to be easily entered and stored in an electronic format, which allows for easier billing and insurance payments, as well as for greater patient safety.

Translating doctors’ notes into code is the job of a medical coder, or health information technician, both of whom play essential roles. Though they don’t work directly with patients, they interact constantly with other medical staff members, including lab and X-ray technicians, surgeons, nurses, and administrative personnel.

Before you start thinking that the job is only about plugging in numbers, consider some of the skills necessary to do it right: Computer savvy is a must, as is knowledge of math, science, anatomy, and physiology. Technicians also must be detail oriented, well organized, accurate, and discrete.

Exponential opportunities

The job is also especially important nowadays, with state and federal initiatives underway to mandate the use of electronic health records in all health care settings. In the next few years, the job market for this career area will grow rapidly. Through 2016, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts employment to grow 18 percent. Along with high demand comes solid pay; technicians’ average yearly earnings are around $31,450. Many job postings offer sign-on bonuses, and chances to advance into supervisory roles (and into higher income brackets) abound.

The market is strongest in smaller hospitals and clinics that are still developing their electronic health record databases. “That’s where our students have an advantage,” says Rosalie Jaenisch, instructor and program director of Ridgewater’s Health Information Technician and Medical Coding Specialist programs. “They have the recent knowledge; they have worked on electronic health record software in the classroom. I can’t even begin to name the number of hospitals that I talk with to [place] students in internships.”

Ridgewater offers a two-year, 65-credit Health Information Technician AAS degree and a three-semester, 50-credit Medical Coding Specialist diploma. The two-year degree requires the completion of the school’s general education requirements.

Because it is accredited, students can take the national exam to earn the RHIT (Registered Health Information Technician) credential. It also requires two internships (the Medical Coding Specialist program requires only one).

About three-quarters of Jaenisch’s students are seeking the two-year degree. “You can always get started as a medical coding specialist,” she says. “All courses in the Medical Coding Specialist program are identical to those in the Health Information Technician program.” They include Human Anatomy, Medical Transcription, Legal Aspects of Health Information, Elementary Statistics, Pharmacology for the Medical Office, and Supervision of Health Information.

Graduates of both programs will also learn about the newest batch of codes coming out. In 2013, the 30-year-old code sets now in use will be replaced with newer, larger code sets. And both put students on the path to bigger and better things. Students who complete the two-year degree can go on to a four-year baccalaureate in health information degree offered at the College of St. Scholastica.

“We have students who graduate with a Health Care Administrative Assistant degree and get qualified in transcription and the Coding Specialist diploma,” says Jaenisch. “That is extremely valuable for small hospitals. You might work transcription half a day and in coding the other half of the day.”

Though the program is currently only offered on the Willmar campus, Ridgewater does offer courses online. Jaenisch also travels to the Hutchinson campus about once a month. “We’ll work to accommodate you if you’re interested in this program,” she says.

Jenny Sherman is a New York City-based freelance writer.
Extra Credit

Ridgewater’s nursing programs receive continuing accreditation by an independent educational review agency.

Ridgewater’s nursing programs have long had a reputation for quality and high standards, both with graduates and health care organizations. Now, an independent organization has put its stamp of approval on them as well. The National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission Inc. (NLNAC) recently granted the College’s associate degree nursing and practical nursing programs continuing accreditation. By meeting all conditions of the accreditation, Ridgewater will maintain the status through the next review in 2016.

NLNAC accreditation is a voluntary, self-regulatory process that focuses on seven core components: mission and governance, faculty, students, curriculum and instruction, resources, integrity, and educational effectiveness. “The greatest benefit of accreditation is to our students,” says Lynn Johnson, director of nursing at Ridgewater. “It helps lessen barriers when they elect to advance their degrees. Because it is a peer-review process, other institutions and programs recognize that NLNAC-accredited programs have taken the extra step to strengthen educational quality. Therefore, our investment in continued accreditation for our nursing programs fosters educational access and mobility for our graduates.”

Johnson adds that the accreditation can also help improve the chances that Ridgewater graduates will be first in line for job openings. “There are health care institutions and systems that will only hire graduates of accredited programs, adding further value to our graduates through broad access to employment opportunities,” she notes.

The College also benefits. The accreditation recognizes that its programs have been evaluated by a qualified, independent group of peers, and that it has met strict standards in the appropriate manner. It also helps the College focus on continuous improvement by illustrating areas for further development and by fostering self-examination.

For more information on nursing at Ridgewater, call 800-722-1151. You can also find out more on the Web by going to www.ridgewater.edu.
—Sam Bowen

Get in the Swing!

11th-Annual Ridgewater Athletics Golf Tournament set for June 12.

The Ridgewater College Foundation will host its 11th-Annual Athletic Golf Tournament Friday, June 12, 2009, at Eagle Creek Golf Course in Willmar. All proceeds will support Ridgewater College athletic programs.

A four-person scramble start will kick off the event at 12 p.m. The afternoon will feature a variety of contests—including a skins game and a putting tournament—with great individual and team prizes. A social hour and fajita/margarita buffet dinner will start at 6 p.m.

Cost
Includes 18 holes of golf, shared power cart, and a free gift.
• $65 per person (Eagle Creek members)
• $85 per person (non-Eagle Creek members)

Mulligans
Available for purchase.

Sponsorships
Four sponsorship levels are available.
Contact Bobbie Mattison at 320-222-6095 for more information.

Registration Deadline
• Deadline: Monday, June 8, 2009
• Register online at: www.ridgewater.edu/Foundation/Events

Find Out More!
Contact Bobbie Mattison, Ridgewater College Foundation, 320-222-6095, e-mail: bobbie.mattison@ridgewater.edu

www.ridgewatermag.com
Gridiron Great

Ridgewater’s Alex McLaughlin named first-team All-American.

Ridgewater sophomore Alex McLaughlin was named a first-team All-American in November 2008 by the NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association). The standout running back also received the most votes from Minnesota College Athletic Conference coaches and was a first-team All-Conference selection two years in a row.

Ridgewater football head coach Rob Baumgarn had submitted the Apple Valley native’s name to the NJCAA regional director, who deemed the nomination worthy enough to submit to the national director. Ultimately, it was an easy choice. McLaughlin, who played in all nine regular season games, led the nation in rushing with 1,730 yards and 16 touchdowns, averaging a hefty 6.3 yards per carry and 192 rushing yards per game. He also caught nine passes for 64 yards.

Thanks to his sterling season on the Ridgewater gridiron, McLaughlin was offered a full football scholarship to Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., where he will begin classes this fall. He has two years of eligibility remaining.

McLaughlin’s first season at Ridgewater was also impressive: In five games, he rushed for 670 yards and seven touchdowns. “Alex is probably the most motivated person I’ve ever coached or been around in football,” says Baumgarn, who has been at the school for eight years, the last four as head coach. “He is the first All-American I’ve had. He was determined to be the best. He lifted weights, he ran, and he kept his nose in the books—he had a 3.6 GPA. He did everything right and things paid off for him.”

—Phil Bolsta

Difficult Times, Difficult Measures

With Minnesota facing a budget deficit, Ridgewater is keeping its focus on how to best serve its students and communities.

By now, most Minnesotans are no doubt aware of the $4.8 billion budget deficit facing the state. As part of his efforts to address that deficit, Gov. Tim Pawlenty released a budget proposal that would have dramatic consequences for both Ridgewater and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System. The governor has proposed cutting nearly $146 million system-wide — a figure that would equate to a loss of between $1.6 and $2 million annually to Ridgewater in fiscal years 2010 and 2011. What’s more, the proposal comes on the heels of a $20 million cut for the current biennium that has already trimmed more than $443,000 from Ridgewater’s base allotment.

While the state’s budget-setting process is far from over, Ridgewater has begun addressing the potential cuts. Some of these steps include not filling recently vacated positions, implementing a partial spending freeze, and limiting all nonessential travel. It also will take a strategic approach to future reductions. “We will work diligently to find places where we can become more efficient and make better use of current resources,” says Ridgewater President Dr. Douglas Allen. “There are multiple ways we can address budget reductions, including development of enrollment growth and other revenue sources; non-personnel spending reductions; personnel cuts; reductions in the size, scope, and number of program offerings; student services reductions; tuition increases, and utilization of fund balances and reserves.”

Allen adds that no matter what decisions the college makes, it will strive to fulfill its mission. “Though these are difficult times, our focus will remain on doing the best we can to serve our students and communities,” he says.

—Sam Bowen
Building the Future

A pair of nursing faculty members receives a prestigious designation that also promises to benefit the college.

Two Ridgewater Nursing department faculty members recently received a noteworthy honor that also will benefit the College. In January, Jeanne Cleary and Faith Johnson learned that they were accepted into the prestigious National League of Nursing Health Information Technology Scholars (HITS) program. HITS is highly selective—approximately 40 candidates were selected from a pool of more than 400 scholars, facilitators, and educators.

The one-year HITS program, a faculty development collaborative, is partially funded by the federal government’s Health Resources and Service Administration. Program participants are working with faculty from the University of Kansas School of Nursing and the schools of nursing at the University of Colorado-Denver and Indiana University to develop, implement, and disseminate information technology in nursing curriculums.

The HITS program has four objectives:
• Transform teaching and learning in the 21st century
• Improve nursing education and practice
• Expand infrastructure for clinical learning processes
• Optimize patient safety and drive improvements in health care quality.

After completing six intense learning modules and networking with other program participants online, Cleary and Johnson flew to a conference in Indianapolis in early March. Every participant was challenged to develop a project that would improve faculty evaluation of student learning. Cleary and Johnson’s project focused on debriefing students in clinical simulation labs, which are designed to simulate clinical settings. Johnson and Cleary are looking forward to making an even greater impact on the education of Ridgewater students.

“Ridgewater is already a national leader in simulation,” Johnson notes. “Both of our campuses have well-equipped sim labs and we have a full-time director of simulation. But the Indianapolis session was phenomenal. There are many opportunities to integrate technology into nursing education in Minnesota.”

—Phil Bolsta

Nursing Programs at Ridgewater

For more information on Ridgewater’s Nursing program, call 800-722-1151. You can also find out more on the Web by going to www.ridgewater.edu.
Auto Savings Plan

Here’s how you can help educate tomorrow’s mechanics and auto body technicians—and potentially save on your taxes at the same time.

Want to get a break on your taxes while helping to train the region’s future workforce at the same time? Consider donating your used car to Ridgewater’s Auto Body Collision Repair and Auto Technology programs.

While both programs feature outstanding instructors and technically advanced facilities, they also face an ongoing challenge. In short, it’s extremely difficult to find vehicles to use for hands-on training. Now the Ridgewater College Foundation is making it easy for you to help.

Here’s how:

• Contact the Foundation to set up a time to deliver your vehicle to campus.
• Determine the value of the vehicle you are donating. According to the IRS, fair market value is “the price a willing buyer would pay and a willing seller would accept for the vehicle when neither party is compelled to buy or sell, and both parties have reasonable knowledge of relevant facts.” (See www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p4303.pdf or www.irs.gov/publications/p561/index.html).
• Bring the vehicle, title, and keys to Ridgewater.
• Complete a one-page donation form that the Foundation provides.

Tax break
Within seven to 10 business days after you donate the vehicle, the Foundation will send you a letter of appreciation and receipt that contains the information required by the IRS. Because the Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, the donation is a charitable contribution that can be deducted from your taxes. However, some limitations may apply and individual tax situations can vary, so you’ll also want to check with a tax professional.

For more information, contact Kelly Magnuson at 320-222-6094 or kelly.magnuson@ridgewater.edu.
A Foundation for Success

The Ridgewater College Foundation holds its annual Scholarship Awards dinner and recognizes some noteworthy individuals.

The Ridgewater College Foundation recently hosted its annual Scholarship Awards Dinner, an event that recognizes scholarship donors and recipients, along with notable alumni and friends. “It’s an opportunity to celebrate student accomplishments,” says Bobbie Mattison, the Foundation’s director. “But it’s also a chance to pay tribute to the people and organizations that support efforts to keep doors to educational opportunity open for students.”

Mattison adds that the evening always offers several powerful and rewarding moments. “Several scholarship recipients noted that the Foundation and its contributors helped them stay in school and complete their degrees during these tough economic times,” she says. “But it’s also not all about the financial support—several students explained that the scholarship had meant that someone believed in them. And that belief, along with the financial assistance, truly made a difference in their lives and helped them succeed.”

Distinguished Service Award

Another highlight of the event was the presentation of the Distinguished Service Award to Walt Gislason. The award recognizes individuals for exceptional accomplishments in their profession, and/or for outstanding service to Ridgewater College and the community. A former instructor at Ridgewater (when it was still known as Willmar Junior College), Gislason owns Walt’s Car Wash in downtown Willmar and Regional Carwash Distributors, a firm that sells and installs car washes throughout the Upper Midwest. Over the years, he’s been a strong supporter of Ridgewater, holding car wash and oil change fundraisers and establishing the Walt’s Scholarship, which has provided more than $35,000 in scholarships.

Distinguished Alumni Award

At the event, Dr. Scott Nyberg of the Mayo Clinic received the Distinguished Alumni Award. Nyberg attended Ridgewater in the late 1970s as a senior in high school and then studied at the college for a year as part of a pre-engineering group before heading to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and medical school at John Hopkins University. Today he is a transplant surgeon at the Mayo Clinic and a professor of surgery in Mayo’s medical school. He’s also the chair and founder of the Mayo Liver Support Laboratory, which develops support devices for patients with liver failure and sepsis.

The Ridgewater College Foundation is a charitable, nonprofit organization that provides financial support for enhanced student, staff, and program success at Ridgewater College. It awards more than 300 scholarships each year.

For more information on the Foundation, contact Bobbie Mattison at 320-222-6093, bobbie.mattison@ridgewater.edu.

Attention Ridgewater Alumni!

We want to keep in touch with you.

The Ridgewater College Foundation is trying to locate as many of its former students and graduates (alumni) as possible. If you attended and/or graduated from Ridgewater College—or Willmar Technical College, Willmar Community College, or Hutchinson Technical College at any time before these colleges merged—we want you to be heard from! Please go online to complete our Alumni Profile Update form at www.ridgewater.edu, then click on “College Foundation and Alumni.” Or take a few moments now to complete the form provided here and mail it to:

Ridgewater College Foundation
P.O. Box 1097
Willmar, MN 56201

The information you provide on this form (with the exception of DOB and SSN) may be made available to classmates planning reunions or just wanting to stay in touch. Ridgewater College and the Ridgewater College Foundation will also use the information to keep you informed of special events and opportunities at the college. We are excited to connect with you and tell you about the great things happening at your alma mater!
Return on Investment

With the U.S. economy stuck in recession, now is the time to think about retraining or going back to college. Ridgewater can help.

The bad news just keeps on coming these days. Over the course of the last year, the U.S. economy has, in the words of billionaire investor Warren Buffett, “fallen off a cliff.” Since October 2008 alone, more than 4 million American workers have lost their jobs. Credit card defaults hit 6.3 percent by the end of 2008, as people struggled to make ends meet. Many were also struggling to hold onto their homes, with one in nine mortgages either delinquent or in foreclosure.

Even in the face of such dismal news, there is one investment that continues to provide an impressive ROI: education. For starters, people with college educations make significantly more money than those without one. Numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that a person with an associate's degree will earn about $1.6 million during his or her career. A person with a bachelor's degree will do even better, earning approximately $2.1 million over their working lifetime—nearly $1 million more than someone with only a high school diploma.

Degree-holders also enjoy greater job security. Statistics show that unemployment rates for people with a college degree are half that of people with only a high school education.

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of adults have been returning to the classroom. According to a recent study by the TNS NFO research firm, adults 25 years and older now make up close to 40 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. While some have lost their jobs and are retraining for new positions, others are adding to their skill banks in an effort to increase their job security or advance their careers. No matter the reason, the fact remains that investing the time and money to pursue a college education is a smart move.

Opportunities

With that in mind, Ridgewater offers its students a wealth of opportunities to strengthen and improve their economic futures. Its educational menu includes associate degrees in arts, science and applied science, as well as diplomas and certificates in more than 100 programs, and it has transfer agreements with numerous Minnesota state universities that allow students to easily transfer credits toward a four-year degree. Ridgewater also offers many online courses, which provide working adults with the flexibility to continue their education without having to schedule classroom time.

Ridgewater’s programs also align with many occupations that the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has identified as the fastest growing between 2006 and 2016. Per the BLS, the top five occupations and their predicted growth rates are:

- network systems and data communications analysts (53.4 percent)
- personal and home care aides (50.6 percent)
- home health aides (48.7 percent)
- computer software engineers/applications (44.6 percent)
- veterinary technologists and technicians (41 percent).

Other occupations making the list include medical assistants; accountants and bookkeepers; heating, ventilation, air conditioning, and refrigeration (HVAC/R) systems technicians; physical therapy assistants; dental hygienists and assistants; computer systems analysts, and database administrators.

Ridgewater offers degree and diploma programs in many of these areas. For more information on them, call 800-722-1151 or 320-222-5200. You can also find out more on the Web by going to www.ridgewater.edu.

The bottom line: Whether you're looking for work, planning a career change, or hoping to expand your skill set, Ridgewater can help you make the most of your investment.

—Vicki Stavig

Fiscal Fitness

Need help paying for college? A grant program designed specifically for adult learners can provide serious help.

While returning to college is an undeniably smart option, paying for it can be a little daunting, particularly in tough times. Help is available, however, through a variety of programs such as the Alliss Educational Foundation Grant.

Designed to help adult learners either begin their college careers or return to college, the grant is not based on family income. It is available to Minnesota residents, including aliens who have been granted permanent residency status, who graduated from high school at least seven years ago, or former college students who haven't been in college during the past seven years.

The grant provides tuition for one course of up to five semester credits and covers the cost of textbooks for that course. To qualify, the course must be transferable as an integral academic part of a degree program, or a preliminary or developmental-level course that is required for the student to start the program. People who hold a bachelor’s or higher degree or who already are receiving financial aid or subsidized credits are not eligible.

For more information, contact the college's Financial Aid office at 800-722-1151 or 320-222-5200. You can also find out more on the Web by going to www.ridgewater.edu.
GLOBAL learning
Nikola Nikolic came to Minnesota from Serbia as a high school exchange student and stayed to attend the college. Mi Mi Shwe came from Myanmar (also known as Burma) under the auspices of several teachers at the International School in Yangon.

Even though each came from a different part of the world and under different circumstances, Nikolic and Shwe have a lot in common: Both love math. Both are members of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. Both are active members of the college’s Multicultural Club. Both will receive their AA degrees in May 2009 and transfer to four-year institutions to continue their higher education in the United States. And both say that Ridgewater changed their life.

Nikolic, age 20, came to Minnesota as a high school exchange student to spend his senior year at Long Prairie-Grey Eagle High School in Long Prairie. An exchange student agency representative visited his high school in Zemun, a Belgrade suburb, and talked about the opportunities for being an exchange student in the United States. “I was asked where I would like to go, and I picked the central part of the country,” Nikolic says. “I stayed with a family that had a son my age. I could understand everything they said to me, but my vocabulary was not the greatest. I needed to speak out more. I still go to visit them whenever I can.”

Nikolic, who played soccer in Serbia, played football at Long Prairie and caught the eye of Ron Baumgarn, Ridgewater’s football coach. “I got a letter from Mr. Baumgarn saying he would like me to come and be the kicker for the football team,” says Nikolic. “I had applied to Ridgewater and a few other colleges, so I checked out the Web site and saw that Ridgewater had a soccer program. I started talking to Edel Fernandez [Ridgewater’s director of multicultural affairs and soccer coach] and decided that Ridgewater was the best option for me and not too expensive.”

The first year Nikolic played soccer for Ridgewater, he scored 18 goals and had 18 assists, was chosen for the first division team of the Community College Conference and nominated for All-American status. “I haven’t seen a soccer player like Nikola,” says Fernandez. “I think he could play professionally. But he’s not just a successful soccer player. He is an excellent student, very dedicated to his studies, and he wants to get college done first.”

Nikolic has a work study job as a peer math tutor in Ridgewater’s Academic Support Center and is also involved in the college’s Multicultural Club. “We just had our fourth annual Multicultural Week at the college and Nikola helped out a lot,” says Fernandez. “He brings a broader perspective—a European point of view—to the college.”

Matt Gustafson, Nikolic’s academic counselor echoes those sentiments. “Nikola is the type of student we like having here at Ridgewater,” he notes. “He is friendly, polite, and respectful. As a student/athlete, he serves as a role model for others—he’s a top soccer player and a top student.”

Although Nikolic has applied to several U.S. colleges and universities, he hasn’t decided yet which one he will attend. He plans to major in international business and math and wants a school with a good soccer program. “Ridgewater was a really nice way to start a college education,” he says. “There is a lot of one-on-one with the teachers. When I need help with my assignments or don’t understand a problem, I can go to them anytime.”

Nikolic currently lives with a family in Willmar with two other Ridgewater students, one of whom is a member of the family. He would like to see more diversity at the college, and would highly recommend Ridgewater to anyone coming from another country or culture. “It’s a great place, and I wish the college was for four years instead of two,” says Nikolic. “I miss my family and have gone home to Serbia to visit every summer, but I’m always glad when I get back here.”

“[Ridgewater is] a great place, and I wish the college was for four years instead of two.”

—Nikola Nikolic
Mi Mi Shwe

When Mi Mi Shwe first attended the International School in Yangon, Myanmar, as a 10th-grader, she faced a serious challenge: She didn’t speak English. That was a problem, as all of the courses were in English, including biology, which was taught by Susan Semmler, a native of New London. “It was a very tough year,” says Shwe, age 20. “I understood the biology terms from a course I took in public school, but that was all.”

Semmler, who now teaches biology at the St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists, says Shwe simply needed the right opportunity and environment to succeed. “Mi Mi made unbelievable strides from the beginning to the end of the year,” she says. “The teachers saw that she had great potential and we wanted her to succeed. But she comes from a very poor family and there were not a lot of opportunities for her to continue her education outside Myanmar.”

So Semmler and three of her colleagues devised a plan to sponsor Shwe at a two-year college in the United States. They chose Ridgewater because Semmler knew it was a good school and it is near her hometown of New London. “We had to figure out a way to help give her an education that couldn’t be taken away,” says Semmler. “We pay for her tuition and books, plus one round-trip plane ticket back to visit her family, and she lives with my parents in New London.”

Shwe’s academic advisor, Kasi Johnson, says the young woman has thrived at Ridgewater. “She welcomes all academic challenges,” Johnson notes. “She is a model student and is fully aware of the time, commitment, and discipline it takes to become a top student.”

Semmler is equally happy with Shwe’s achievements. “I’m very proud of how she’s adapted academically and socially,” she says. “She’s intelligent, she works hard, and she’s done a lot to become her own person.”

“I’m really glad I’m here,” says Shwe. “It’s just perfect for me. The campus is not very big. The classrooms are just the right size. And the instructors are amazing. Some of my high school friends go to big schools like Stanford University, and it’s really hard for them to talk to their instructors. The instructors here are very caring and they love to answer my questions.”

Both Johnson and Semmler have been influential in Shwe’s decision to become an educator. “I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I changed my mind three times,” says Shwe. “First I wanted to be in elementary education, then I wanted to go into special education, and now I want to teach junior high school math, maybe in an international school,” she says. “My advisor [Johnson] has been very helpful in figuring out my courses. I can go to her anytime. And my sponsor [Semmler] has been a good example for me.”

Shwe considers herself a shy person but as a member of Ridgewater’s Multicultural Club, she has made a lot of friends while learning about other cultures and sharing her own experiences with students and staff. She says she has felt no discrimination at Ridgewater but would like to see more international students attend. “A lot of people in Asia think they have to be rich to come to the United States for their education,” says Shwe. “But they would be surprised at how inexpensive Ridgewater is compared to the big universities. When I talk to my friends, I encourage them to come here.”

She also spends time at the college’s Academic Support Center. “You can go there anytime and students or instructors will help you with math, English, chemistry, or other subjects,” she says. “It’s always very welcoming.”

A solid foundation

Shwe recently learned that she was accepted at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, S.D. Nikolic has yet to make his choice. But no matter where they go, both will have completed all of the coursework for their majors and received the grounding they will need to pursue their educational and career goals.

Although there are relatively few international students at Ridgewater, it is a comfortable place for students from other countries and other cultures to get a good start on their college education. This is in line with the college’s goal to increase students’ awareness and understanding of individual and group differences through programs in the classroom as well as college-wide multicultural events and activities open to the entire community.

“...and they love to answer my questions.”
—Mi Mi Shwe

Evelyn Cottle Raedler is a Bloomington-based freelance writer.
Shore patrol

Lebling grew up in Ocean City, Md., on Chesapeake Bay. As a kid, he’d bring home rabbits, birds, cats, and other stray animals he found. He’d patrol the shore, on the watch for dolphins and seals in the bay, and wonder about the hidden aspects of their lives beneath the waves. “That’s where my love of marine mammals developed,” he recalls, “growing up on Chesapeake Bay.”

Since childhood he wanted to become a veterinarian. Unfortunately, his high school grades wouldn’t allow it. “God bless the guidance counselors, because they’re supposed to point you in the right direction,” says Lebling. “When I said I wanted to be a veterinarian, [my counselor’s] suggestion was that I should look into wildlife photography.”

But he wasn’t interested in photography. Instead, he went to Salisbury State University in Maryland and pursued a degree in outdoor education. During the summers, he worked on his cousin’s fishing boat in Alaska. In 1989, the tanker Exxon Valdez split open on Bligh Reef, spilling more than 10 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. That summer, instead of fishing, Lebling and his cousin ferried workers to clean-up sites. Hundreds of thousands of sea birds and thousands of marine mammals such as sea otters were killed by the spill. The scenes made a powerful impact on Lebling. “I was able to see first-hand piles of carcasses,” he says.

After graduation, Lebling joined the National Outdoor Leadership School in Wyoming and began guiding expeditions in Mexico during the winter and Alaska during the summer. He led kayak trips through the very area devastated years earlier by the oil spill. He incorporated what he knew of the accident into his lessons. On the side, he also ran llama pack trips in Montana and dogsledding trips in northern Minnesota.
Renewed interest
Working with animals in the backcountry rekindled Lebling’s interest in veterinary care, especially as animals became sick or injured. “I wanted to know what to do,” he explained. “I wanted to know what was wrong with these animals.”

A full veterinary degree would take years, he realized. But he could complete a vet tech degree in a couple of years. It seemed manageable. So as he drove his truck and camper between jobs, he kept a list of veterinary technology schools. “If I was in a town where there was a vet tech school, I would schedule a visit,” he says. “One day I hit Minnesota. I made an appointment with Al Balay.”

Balay, one of the faculty veterinarians at Ridgewater College, took Lebling on a tour. “It was what I was looking for,” Lebling says. “A small community, and a smaller school with high standards that was obviously dedicated to its students. When I stepped foot on the Ridgewater campus, I was sold right away.”

He started the Veterinary Technology program in 1999, at age 30. For the first month, he lived out of his camper with his two dogs as he looked for housing. He also worked two jobs—as a short-order cook in Spicer and a late-night DJ at a local country-music radio station. Two scholarships eventually gave him the luxury of cutting back on work. “I was honored to receive the scholarships, and it definitely helped out,” he notes.

His instincts about the college proved right on. “The big impact was how dedicated the instructors were and how supportive the administration was,” Lebling says. “They gave it their all.”

He notes that the courses were challenging, but highly rewarding. “The expectation was to put mature, qualified vet techs into the field in two years,” Lebling says, adding that the program’s lab component proved to be the most demanding aspect. “Lab work in the vet tech world has the most information involved with it. The lab work is a big part of what we actually do in the field.”
North to Alaska
When he graduated from Ridgewater, Lebling took a three-month internship at a private veterinary clinic in Duluth, treating dogs, cats, and other household pets. He also spent three months at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center in St. Paul, where he trained in radiology, necropsies, and critical care. “It was a true, intense residency,” he says. “Ridgewater has an excellent reputation for putting good technicians into these internship programs. Veterinary clinics from around the state want interns from Ridgewater because the college turns out quality students.”

By rights, Lebling was ready to go out and get a job. But he lined up a second internship—this one at Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, a small town adjacent to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and about 120 miles south of Anchorage. In retrospect, it was an obvious choice. “Because of my love of the wilderness and the 10 years of coming and going to Alaska, I knew in my heart that I wanted to move there after I graduated,” he says.

“Ridgewater has an excellent reputation for putting good technicians into these internship programs.”
—Tim Lebling

He landed the internship, loaded the dogs in his truck and camper, and set off for the center, which is Alaska’s only public aquarium and ocean wildlife rescue center. His plan was to stay three months. “Before my internship was over, the center offered me a position as a vet tech in the marine mammals rescue and rehabilitation program.”

Today Lebling is one of two vet technicians at the center. He cares for the animals permanently housed at the center and also for creatures that have been injured and brought in temporarily. Lebling was also designated the center’s “stranding coordinator,” which means he’s responsible for bringing in injured animals or coordinating responses to situations.
events such as whale beachings. “It’s basically like you’re working at an emergency clinic, but with marine mammals,” he explains. “It’s the same vet tech work you do in a small animal clinic—just with different species.”

His busiest season is the summer, when he treats an influx of injured sea birds, sea otters, seals, walruses, and sea lions. He helps disentangle whales from fishing nets. A couple of years ago he was called to a cruise ship, where a dead fin whale, more than 50 feet long, was draped across the prow. He performed a necropsy to determine if the ship collided with a dead whale or with a live whale cruising near the surface. A series of collisions with living whales in a particular area, for example, might cause shipping companies to reroute their vessels.

When working with injured animals, Lebling and his colleagues aim to return animals to the wild, so they take pains that the animals don’t become habituated to human care. They don’t hand-feed the creatures. They don’t talk around them. They don’t even look them in the eye. “We make every effort not to let these ani-
“I left Ridgewater not only with a career but with some lifelong friends,” he says. “It’s pretty powerful when a program can give that to you.”

—Tim Lebling

Veterinary Technology at Ridgewater

Ridgewater’s Veterinary Technology program is the longest running public Vet Tech program in Minnesota. The program, which was established and accredited in 1972, features highly qualified instructors, state-of-the-art equipment and facilities, and one of the lowest tuition rates of any veterinary technology program in the state.

For more information, go to www.ridgewater.edu, or call 800-722-1151 or 320-222-5200.

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Words of wisdom

In the years Lebling has been at the center, he’s had the opportunity to choose Ridgewater students for internships. While going to Ridgewater isn’t any guarantee of being selected, Lebling says he has confidence in the quality of training its students receive. “I know what their schooling was like.”

His advice to students considering a career as a veterinary technician? First, he says, “get as much animal experience as possible,” whether it’s caring for dogs, working at a stable, or raising pigs. “Knowing how to act around animals is one of the key things to getting into an animal career,” he notes.

He also advises students to put in the necessary effort. “For two short years, give it 100 percent,” he says. “Sacrifice your weekends to study. Ask questions when you need to.”

His final word of advice: “Think of ways you can advance your career as a vet tech.” A two-year degree can be a stepping-stone to specialties in animal dentistry, surgery, or anesthesia. Students can work not only in clinics, but also in zoos or research facilities. Graduates of Ridgewater’s Veterinary Technology program should “realize that this is just the beginning.”

Almost a decade after graduation, Lebling still stays in touch with Ridgewater students and faculty. “I left Ridgewater not only with a career but with some lifelong friends,” he says. “It’s pretty powerful when a program can give that to you.”

Greg Breining is a St. Paul-based freelance writer.
Although he didn’t know it at the time, Dave Farber began training for his future career when he was 10 years old. Farber, now 40, is the founder of Farber Sound LLC, a Medina-based sound production and audio system installation company. As one of the most successful Midwestern firms in the industry, Farber Sound has produced shows for dozens of regional and national artists, ranging from the Twin Cities-based, Emmy-winning a cappella group The Blenders to folk singer Arlo Guthrie to jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis and artists such as Hootie and the Blowfish and Jewel. It has also done special events work for corporations such as Best Buy, McDonalds, and the Minnesota Vikings.

Farber’s interest in sound production started back in 1978 when as a 10 year old, he formed Ocean, a three-piece band (two guitarists and a drummer) with a pair of his childhood pals. They initially played ‘50s and ‘60s rock and roll at carnivals and fairs, and then later in bars in and around Watertown. (Farber grew up on a farm nearby, close to Winsted.) “We didn’t have a sound man,” recalls Farber, who was one of the guitarists. “Whenever there was a problem with a microphone or a speaker, I was the one who took care of it.”

After Ocean came a year of performing with Showdown, a country western band, two years with Four Warning (Top-40 rock and roll), five years with Grease (‘50s and ‘60s show band), and then back to country for eight years in the band High Horse. “I never had that ‘American Idol’ thing going on,” Farber explains. “My goals were always oriented toward high

By Chuck Benda
quality, rather than fame. I wanted to figure out how to get the best out of whatever I had to work with.”

He carried that perfectionist streak to his sound system work. As he moved from band to band, Farber acquired speakers, mixers, and other “chunks” of sound equipment, as he likes to call the gear of his trade. And he acquired more expertise at helping his bands sound good. “I always felt confident in my ear for music, so I just kept pushing to be the one who handled the sound,” he says.

But he never envisioned sound production as a career—until his senior year at Watertown-Mayer High School, when he decided it was time to have a conversation with a guidance counselor. “Growing up on a farm, I had no idea you could make a career out of sound production,” Farber says, chuckling. “I told the counselor I played in bands and I liked to work with the sound equipment. He told me about the Audio Technology program at Ridgewater College, and I thought: ‘Hmm, maybe I should check that out.’”

“Checking it out” quickly turned into an eye-opening, career-building experience. After graduating from high school in the spring of 1986, he enrolled in Ridgewater’s two-year Audio Technology program and began taking classes at the Hutchinson campus that fall. During the first few days of school, his instructors presented an overview of the program and talked about career opportunities, including jobs in sound system installations, studio equipment operation and maintenance, and sound production for concerts and other events. “After the first week, I told myself, ‘Wow—this is it!’” Farber recalls. “This is where I was meant to be.”

Convinced by his instructors that sound production was a serious industry—where people get paid to do what

“**I always felt confident in my ear for music, so I just kept pushing to be the one who handled the sound.”**

—Dave Farber
he already loved to do—Farber pursued his education with the same quest for excellence that guided his career as a musician. He already had extensive practical experience with sound production in “laboratories” ranging from bars to open-air stages at county fairs—and now he was learning the theory that explained why things sounded the way they did. “When you’re on the road, you were always trying to figure out why a speaker rig wasn’t right for the venue or why a microphone was sounding funny,” he says. “A lot of those things became clear once I learned the theory at Ridgewater. The theory proves that your ears were telling you the right thing in the first place.”

Hands-on experience
While his classroom work helped Farber develop the theoretical knowledge he needed, a construction project at Ridgewater College helped him garner hands-on experience in audio systems installation. During his second year at the college, he and his classmates helped build a complete, commercial-quality recording studio and wired all the sound equipment in it. That experience and his diploma helped Farber land a job installing sound systems after he graduated from Ridgewater in the winter of 1989.

Through his time at Ridgewater, and four years of installing sound systems, Farber continued to play professionally as a musician. He also acquired quite an array of sound equipment and began doing production work for other bands. With three different jobs—musician, sound system installer, and sound producer—his life was getting a bit out of balance. So in 1993, Farber decided to give up the life of the musician and quit doing systems installations for other companies so he could devote more energy to what was now his main passion: sound production. “I was already doing quite a bit of serious production work on the side,” he explains, “but the official start date for Farber Sound was 1994.”

Top and bottom: Large events require highly sophisticated equipment and plenty of behind-the-scenes work.

He soon discovered that with his own business, there were even more tasks to be juggled, and more demands on his time. What’s more, there were some pretty serious expenses associated with trying to make a name for yourself in sound production. “One of the biggest challenges in this business is that the equipment is terribly expensive,” says Farber. “We never had any investors offering to pour $5 million into our company, so we had to do it on our own.”

Formula for success
By the time he launched his business, Farber owned enough equipment to do local and regional production work. But if the company was going to grow, he had to expand his inventory of sound equipment as well. “We had to approach inventory growth in a methodical way,” he says. “To get new, bigger artists, we needed new, more expensive equipment. But we had to do it all in incremental steps to make sure we didn’t get overextended financially. It took a lot of patience.”

At the same time, Farber knew he needed to develop the installation business, too. Although it’s not his first love, installation provides much-needed revenue and work during the first quarter of the year—which is traditionally the slowest time of year for production work.

Sound system installation isn’t a “yellow-pages” kind of business, according to Farber. It’s a word-of-mouth business—do a good job, and you get more work. So he made sure he did a good job. Word of mouth is also critical to success in the entertainment business, which is why Farber never strayed from his quality-based approach, no matter how big or small the job. “We’re never satisfied,” he says. “Even if we’ve produced the same event for five years in a row, we’re always looking for ways to make it more impressive than the year before. Maybe we can tweak the speakers at slightly different angles or tune the system better.”

The patience and perseverance have paid off. Today, Farber Sound owns all the sound equipment it needs to handle almost any kind of concert or event, at any venue, with crowds ranging from 500
to 15,000. In addition to a fulltime staff, the company often turns to subcontractors to handle the workload during the busy concert and festival season. All in all, business is good. Farber has maintained a 65/35 split between production work and installation and/or consulting work. The company also recently added some impressive new gigs, including all the grandstand shows at the North Dakota State Fair; a large, two-day Christian music festival in Chicago; and a number of corporate events.

Through it all, Farber has kept in touch with his roots. He, his wife Roxane, and their four children still live in Watertown. He still plays a little music—although these days it’s primarily in church or with family and friends. Despite his loyalty to his small town roots, however, Farber wants to keep pushing toward the big time when it comes to production work. “We’ve never produced a truly major star—like a Paul McCartney or a Celine Dion,” he says. “But I don’t believe that’s something we can’t touch.”

Farber hopes to add some new national artists and maybe a national tour or two during the next couple of years. Beyond that, he’s not sure where his business will take him. “Before I went to Ridgewater, I couldn’t envision any kind of job in the sound business,” he says. “And when we started Farber Sound, I never knew we’d do as well as we have.”

“I just try to keep an open mind and keep doing good work. You never know what doors might open.”

Chuck Benda is an Eagan-based freelance writer.

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Audio Technology at Ridgewater

The college’s Audio Technology program can open the door to careers in a variety of fields, including entertainment, recording, communication, broadcast, and many other exciting industries. Ridgewater offers a pair of degree options: a 71-credit Audio Technology AAS degree and a 64-credit Audio Technology diploma.

To find out more, go to www.ridgewater.edu or call 800-722-1151, 320-234-8500.
When Pamela Bajari’s youngest child was born with a serious heart defect, she spent many anxious days and nights at the University of Minnesota Medical Center. Gradually, she realized that the caregivers tending to her daughter (who eventually recovered) were not merely nurses, they were heroes. “I really admired the work the nurses were doing,” recalls Bajari, now a regional nurse administrator for the State of Minnesota’s Adult Mental Health Division. “They became role models for me. I decided I wanted to be a nurse so I could help other people.”

Thus inspired, Bajari (rhymes with “diary”) enrolled at Ridgewater College, a 20-mile commute from the New London home she shared with her husband, Larry, and their three young children. After completing the LPN (Licensed Practical Nursing) program in 1985, she landed a job at the Paynesville Community Hospital, 15 miles from home.

For the next two years, Bajari juggled work, family and the RN (Registered Nursing) program at
Ridgewater, graduating as an RN in 1987. After a six-month stint at Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar, she accepted a position as a staff nurse at the Willmar Regional Treatment Center (WRTC). In 2002, she was named director of nurses (DON) for both WRTC and the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center, and became the first DON in Minnesota to cover more than one site. That job eventually evolved into her current position, in which she provides nursing administration for state-run behavioral health services throughout greater Minnesota.

It’s a travel-intensive position. “Greater Minnesota is everything outside of the seven-county metro area,” says Bajari, who also holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing from Bethel University in St. Paul, with her master’s work focusing on organizational leadership. “We have crisis services in Duluth and Mankato. We have 10 community behavioral health hospitals all the way from Rochester to Bemidji to Fergus Falls. And we have staff out in all these communities providing services. We cover the whole state.”

A holistic approach

Bajari enjoys psychiatric nursing because of its holistic approach. “It’s not just about behavioral or mental health issues,” she explains. “You need to take a person-centered approach because the patients we serve also have complex health and addiction problems. You have to look at all the aspects of each person’s life and bring them all together to improve their outcomes.”

Bajari takes great pride not only in her work but also in the state’s commitment to nursing. “I accepted a job with the State of Minnesota because I really believed and still believe that it’s important to bring high-quality and evidence-based practices into psychiatric nursing,” she says. “Minnesota is a forerunner in providing quality and innovative mental health services across the nation.”

She adds that the state’s outstanding reputation was a big reason why she was one of 20 nurses in leadership roles across the nation selected as 2008 Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows. “The three-year fellowship program recognizes that nurses must play a pivotal role in leading the redesign and success of healthcare,” Bajari says. “The fellowship is an opportunity to develop critical leadership skills and to work with a nationally recognized team of coaches and instructors.”

The fellowship includes at least two week-long seminars each year as well as various other training sessions and a healthy dose of independent study. Each fellowship member is required to develop a personal development plan and a leadership development project. “For my personal development plan, I’m working with an executive coach as well as with a mentor outside of nursing who can help me develop greater business acumen,” Bajari says. “My leadership development project is all about integrating primary health care into our behavioral health settings.”

Her selection as a Robert Wood Johnson fellow has already begun furthering her career goals. “The part that I appreciate most about my job is that I work for an organization that is very forward thinking and allows me to continue to grow as a leader,” she says. “The next best thing I like is bringing other people along and being a mentor myself. The fellowship is helping me advance both of those goals.”

“I work for an organization that is very forward thinking and allows me to continue to grow as a leader.”

— Pamela Bajari

Learning at each step

After 25 years, Bajari still feels a debt of gratitude to the school where it all began. For the last three years, she has served on Ridgewater’s Nursing Advisory Council. “One of my greatest mentors throughout my entire career was Sonja Westre, my nursing instructor from the LPN program at Ridgewater,” she says. “She has always been available to me and I respect her so much for her ability to see the strength and the potential in people and to push and encourage them.”

Working full-time, attending Ridgewater, and raising a family was a lot of hard work, but Bajari, who still intends to get her doctorate in nursing practice, wouldn’t have had it any other way. “I had three small children under the age of seven,” she says. “Going off to get a bachelor’s degree in nursing didn’t fit my lifestyle at that point, so I made a conscious choice to take the long route. I have never regretted going that route. I think there’s extremely valuable learning at each step in the process.”

Today, Bajari, a grandmother of nine who enjoys riding Harley Davidsons with her husband, occasionally marvels at the path she has traveled in life. “One of the unique things about me is that I was married at 17, and I’m still married to my husband,” she says. “For me to have the support of my family as I’ve moved up through the profession the way I have is remarkable. I’ve been blessed.”

Phil Bolsta is a Blaine-based freelance writer.
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