

They walked you through things, they helped you out.”

Two years at Ridgewater resulted in an educational assistant diploma. “At that time in my life, I was engaged and thinking about moving,” she explains. “I thought I should at least get a diploma before getting anything else.”

She and her husband-to-be moved to Hastings, where Otte finished her program with an internship, arranged by her instructors at Ridgewater, at a daycare center called Kids Kare. The internship, she says, was excellent, and she was hired at Kids Kare full-time.

## Chapter two

After four comfortable years at Kids Kare, and after starting a family, Otte’s husband was laid off. They moved back to Hutchinson to be closer to family in 2000. “That’s when I tried the nursing assistant [position],” she says, noting that she completed a three-week training program through Ridgewater and was immediately hired at a local hospital.

But she couldn’t leave daycare behind. In between hospital shifts, she filled in part time at Ridgewater’s daycare center as an assistant teacher. When an outside vendor

called Kids Express bought it and took over operations, Otte left her nursing assistant job and accepted a full-time position as assistant director at the daycare. And, when that entity was bought out by Beans Plus Inc., Otte received another promotion.

Today, the 31-year-old mother of two is director of two Beans Plus Inc. child care centers, one of which is still located on the Ridgewater College campus in Hutchinson and the other in Mankato. She says she loves her job—she is working with kids, after all. She also credits the college with guiding her into a career that works for her. “It’s just a great college all around,” she says.

## graduate profile

# Wired for Success

Seven years ago, Kenneth Renner realized he needed a change. Ridgewater helped him reroute his career path.

Farm life—whether it’s tending vegetables, cows, or, in the case of the Renner family, a few thousand mink—is pretty similar wherever you go. Days start early. Everyone works.

This scene was all too familiar to Kenneth Renner, one of eight children growing up (and helping out) on the family mink ranch in Detroit Lakes. “We lived out in the country,” he says. “You couldn’t do sports. I would have liked to play basketball.”

In retrospect, he also wishes he had been pushed to go straight into college after high school. Though not interested in farm life at the time, “there really was no pressure at all to go college,” he says. “My parents not enforcing college made it even easier for me not to go to college at the time. I wish they would have.”

Eventually, Renner, who had been a high school honor student with a 3.6 GPA, signed up for a two-year course in electronics at Northwest Technical College (now Minnesota State Community and Technical College) in Wadena. After earning a diploma in 1986, he found a job in Buffalo, working on cable TV transmitters out in the field. But after just two years, he started feeling restless. “I could see there wasn’t a lot of future in the job,” he says.

So he quit and went back to Wadena again for an 11-month course to become an electric line worker. He moved to Litchfield and took a position with Meeker Cooperative working on power lines, scaling poles, and pulling wires into place with ropes and figuring out how to keep the juice flowing. For almost 17 years, Renner’s career was also flowing. “It was a great job; it paid really well,” he says. “But when you get up there in age, well, it’s a really physical job with a lot of long hours. That’s what pretty much drove me out of it. It took a physical toll.”

## A new path

He was still keenly interested in staying in the tech field, though he knew he’d have to get more education to change paths. He looked no further than Ridgewater College. “I had a wife and a three-year-old and a newborn,” he says. “It wasn’t an option to just quit work and live at the same time.”

What made up his mind that Ridgewater was the answer, he says, was the option to take classes at night. He signed up in 2000, at the age of 36. “The teachers were really flexible on when I could meet with them and get work handed in,” he says.

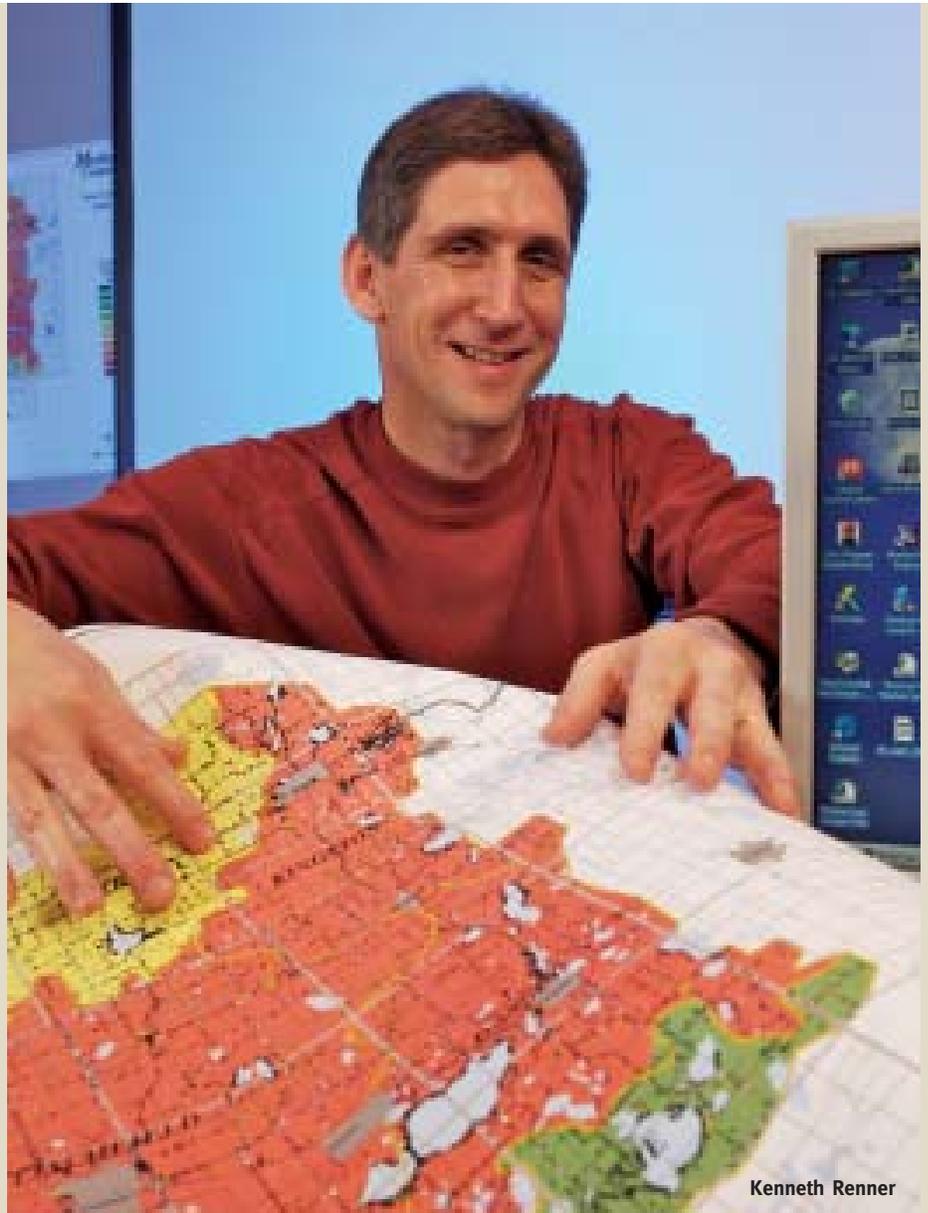
His advisor, Jim Martinson, a faculty member in Ridgewater’s Computer Programmer program, also went out of his way to make things easier for his advisee. “He came in times when he didn’t normally have to be there to meet with me,” says Renner.



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For two years, Renner focused on computer networking; but one class on computer programming piqued his interest. He soon knew that he preferred building programs for computers to rewiring them. After five and a half years attending part time, he received his associate of arts degree in computer programming.

Today, the 42-year-old is a computer programmer with Star Energy Services, an Alexandria-based electrical engineering company. He develops software applications that can access information from equipment embedded with GPS coordinates. “Things just fell into place for me,” he says when asked how his career goals have worked out. “Right now, I can’t imagine what else I could go into. I’m really enjoying what I’m doing. It is a great thing that I decided to go back to school.”



Kenneth Renner

graduate profile

# Land of 10,000 Opportunities

Heidi Olson came to Ridgewater for an education. She’s never left—and she’s still learning.

Last January, Heidi Olson, a Ridgewater alum and the college’s current dean of student services, was in the hospital visiting her new niece. She recognized a couple of the nurses on shift that day as Ridgewater graduates. That same week, she brought her son in for some X-rays; the technicians were students in the college’s Radiologic Technology program. “I still get hugs in the grocery store,” says Olson, noting that she often runs into current and former students. “It’s a true testament to what we do here. To be part of that is something special.”

The Willmar native has been part of that special Ridgewater community since 1986, when she enrolled as a PSEO (Post-Secondary Enrollment Option) student at what was then called Willmar Community College. At the time, she was a senior at Willmar Senior High