Meet Dillon Haug, Ridgewater College Class of 2002.

“Going to work on that day in November 1986, it was just a normal day,” wrote Dillon in his book, “Adventures in My World.” “Mom and the brothers, age 5 and 3, were heading into Custer, South Dakota to go to work, school and the babysitter’s when all of a sudden we hit black ice, spun into the other lane and hit a vehicle coming from the other direction.”

Accidents with trucks are always scary, but when the first responder on the scene happens to be the father and husband of the victims, the shock and fear of the unknown is understandably overwhelming.

“I knew what I was going through was bad, but I didn’t realize how significant it was,” Dillon’s father, Reed said. “It was major triage.”

His entire family was rushed to the Rapid City Regional Hospital, but injuries were so severe that they sent the boys, Dillon and Brandon, to Denver Children’s Hospital, while mother, Beth, stayed in Rapid City. It was challenging for Reed to have them separated, but fortunately, Beth had a brother who was a nurse at the Denver facility, helping to keep everyone emotionally connected when they were physically separated.

Fortunately, Dillon doesn’t remember any part of the accident.

They were scary times, Reed recalled. At one point, both the boys and mom were all in comas. Dillon was in a coma the longest, for six weeks. At another point, 3-year-old Brandon actually died, but came back to life to eventually serve in the US Marine Corp and earn a nursing degree.

Dillon had a severe right-side brain injury affecting his left-side function. His emotional and social skills are great, but he struggles with executive functions like preplanning, abstract thinking, and reading subtle cues. With cognitive rehab and therapy to learn to walk and talk again, he eventually made it through school with an Individual Education Plan. Short-term memory is a challenge, but remembering historical dates and songs is a strength. He’s dependent on others for transportation, but he still had dreams for his life.

“After high school I wanted to go to college so much, but I didn’t quite know where,” Dillon said. “My mom started looking on the computer.” They investigated several schools, but couldn’t initially find one that would make enough modifications and adaptations in order for Dillon to be successful.

What parent wouldn’t be proud if your child graduated from high school, earned a college scholarship, and graduated from college with honors while also being involved in several college and community activities?

What if that child also stayed active in his faith, made lots of friends, went on to work at a university, wrote a book, and was selected as a board member on a national council?

Is your chest beaming with pride yet?

Now imagine your pride if your child did all that while having a traumatic brain injury from a car accident that resulted in a six-week coma when he was 5 years old, 25 years ago.

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“We began looking for something hands-on where he didn’t need too much English or math,” Beth explained. That’s when they started exploring occupational skills programs in several states, and discovered Ridgewater College’s program in Willmar. They met with Mary Gafkjen (now retired) and Tim Laffen.

“I knew I needed support,” Dillon said. It was the calm demeanor and steady personalities of Mary and Tim, plus available college and community services that led Dillon and his family to believe that Ridgewater would be a good choice for him. Another plus was an aunt and uncle who lived an hour away from Willmar.

“Once he settled on the school, like any decided senior, Dillon was excited about his future,” Beth said. Gafkjen encouraged him to apply for a scholarship. “He applied and received it, so when people asked what he was going to do after graduation, he could say, ‘I got a scholarship so I’m going to Ridgewater College.’ At his senior banquet, he didn’t have to say he was just going to stay living with mom and dad.”

Both Dillon and his mom agree, people are what make Dillon’s life worthwhile. While attending Custer High School, Dillon was a South Dakota delegate to the 1997 Youth Leadership Forum in Washington, D.C. A year later, he was a delegate to his state’s first Leadership Forum, and was the student manager for the boys’ basketball team for four years.

Serving others and connecting with people are two missions that have long made Dillon’s heart sing. After primarily focusing on his Occupational Skills courses and his new independent living the first year in Willmar, Dillon became heavily involved in activities his second year. Campus ministry and his church gave him support, guidance, and opportunities to help with fundraisers, special events, and supervising church lock-ins for middle school students. Student Senate taught him about governmental processes and advocacy and built his confidence through activity involvement. The local Lion’s Club connected him with community volunteers and outreach, and former coach Mike Johnson and the men’s basketball team gave him a special camaraderie like he had enjoyed in high school by being a team manager.

“We really liked Willmar and the community,” Beth said. “It was so wonderful. He just blossomed!” She and Dillon give much credit to Gafkjen, who was his advisor.

“What I did for Dillon was not any different than what I would do for other students,” Gafkjen explained. “What Ridgewater staff and the community do is give students a real strong place to start. It’s safe; it’s welcoming. We want to make sure students get started off on the right feet and provide what they need to grow in their own direction.

“What was different with Dillon,” Gafkjen fondly remembered, “was the degree he made use of resources and the degree he integrated himself into the Ridgewater College and Willmar communities.”

“He became a much more confident person,” Ridgewater’s Laffen recalled. “It was a real growing experience for Dillon.”

“My eventual goal was to work on a college campus,” Dillon said. He wanted to make a difference to other students the way Ridgewater staff had made a difference for him.

It wasn’t long and Dillon was proving to his parents that his dream of going to college and maybe some day even working at a college was realistic. His mom was nervous about his developing independence and distance from home, but like many moms with kids at college, she soon learned she simply needed to loosen her protective strings, get out of the way and let him grow.

“It was a good choice on my part to go to Willmar and to live independently,” Dillon said. “It was more fun than anything being away from home!” He loved his family dearly, but he loved the excitement of his new independence as well. It was a whole new world. “It was the Campus Ministry Center and the Occupational Skills program that caught my attention.”

“I just want people to know how important Ridgewater College was to who Dillon is today,” Beth said. “I’m so thankful to Mary Gafkjen and Tim Laffen and the program, college and community. The college is so solid with support and everything they offer the students.”
“It helped me find jobs I was interested in,” Dillon said of the Occupational Skills program specifically. He learned job skills, job seeking skills, job keeping skills and eventually worked at Walmart for seven years and at Target during a separate summer job.

“My eventual goal was to work on a college campus,” he said. He wanted to make a difference to other students the way Ridgewater staff had made a difference for him. Being the motivated, goal-oriented person that he is, Dillon headed back closer to his parents and now works in food service at Black Hills University in Spearfish, S.D., as well as in the athletic department as the student manager for yet another men’s basketball team, the Yellow Jackets.

Camaraderie is the part of life that Dillon really loves. It’s why he continues to be involved in the Lion’s Club in Spearfish by being a board member and coordinator for guest speakers and the well-known Lions glasses collection. It’s why he sings in his church choir. It’s why he loves being part of the food service staff and athletic department at BHSU. It’s why he loves hanging out at the Spearfish Common Grounds coffee shop, meeting people.

It’s that connecting with people, in fact, that led Dillon in 2010 to write his own book, “Adventures in My World.”

In his book, which sold 1500 copies its first year, Dillon shares his life journey thus far, everything from the accident that changed his life and his resulting story of overcoming obstacles to his passion for Black Hills history and his clear life philosophies. He has now even donated a signed copy to Ridgewater to share with others.

Dillon has received multiple awards for his leadership, community involvement and protection/advocacy/policy making efforts for individuals with developmental disabilities. In fact, after serving as an officer of a state planning council for developmental disabilities, Dillon was also named as a South Dakota representative and board member for the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities. Recently, Dillon was appointed to the Governing Board of South Dakota Advocacy Services. He begins his first term in that protection and advocacy role this spring.

“The most rewarding thing is that Dillon is a model citizen,” said his dad. “The most admirable thing is he’s a happy individual (despite his challenges).” “We’re really proud of him and his motivation,” Beth added. Dillon’s family was pleased that he was able to reconnect with his instructors at Ridgewater College’s 50th anniversary celebration last September, almost 10 years after Dillon graduated from Ridgewater.

He loved being able to share stories of his progress and independence with Ridgewater staff and friends.

“I told them how things were going good and that I was now working at a college too, a university in South Dakota,” Dillon shared. “Tim said, ‘Wow, you’ve really moved up in the world!’”

Indeed he has and life is good.

Dillon loves to hear from people regarding his life story. You can send your comments to him - or order a copy of his book through this address:

**Dillon Haug**  
810 N. Main Street #193  
Spearfish, SD 57783

Books cost $8.00 each, including shipping and handling.

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Ridgewater’s Occupational Skills Program

Ridgewater’s Occupational Skills program, one of only three in Minnesota, is a post-secondary vocational program for students with disabilities that provides training for entry-level, competitive employment. Occupational Skills combines community-based vocational training with personal management classes on campus.

Key components of the diploma program include:

- Personal Safety
- Job Seeking Skills
- Personal Development
- Relationships
- Independent Living
- Consumer Skills
- Internships
- Community and Leisure Resources

The community-based portion of the program partners students with area employers to allow them to practice their workplace skills. Willmar partners have included such employers as Tires Plus, Loving Arms Day Care, Runnings, Walmart, Walt’s In Out 10-minute Oil Change, Taher, and Bethesda Pleasantview Nursing Home.

For more information, contact Mary Benson, 320-222-8041, mary.benson@ridgewater.edu or Tim Laffen at tim.laffen@ridgewater.edu or the Ridgewater website at www.ridgewater.edu.