

The Remarkable Rise of Chancellor JENNIE VAUGHAN

And the Evolution of Ivy Tech

BY Elisabeth Andrews
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Shannon Zahnle



The future's looking bright for Ivy Tech Community College—Bloomington. With record-breaking enrollment nearing 7,000 students, a construction project set to add nearly 90,000 square feet to the Connie and Steve Ferguson Academic Building, and a capital campaign dedicated to upgrading classrooms, labs, technology, and student common areas, the college is poised for an era of expansion and innovation under newly appointed Chancellor Jennie Vaughan.

Six months ago, however, the mood on campus was tense and bleak. A surprise announcement from Ivy Tech's State Board of Trustees in February placed the region under joint administration with Evansville, potentially separating the campus from its leadership by more than 100 miles and leaving the Bloomington administrative team in limbo as they waited to learn who among them might lose their jobs.

How the campus came back from the brink of losing its unique character — through determination, perseverance, and the grace of a second chance — has a number of

parallels with the student success stories one frequently hears at Ivy Tech. Paths to achievement aren't always linear, students and teachers will tell you; they can often involve roadblocks and stretches of uncertainty.

But, if there's one person who understands how to get past stumbling blocks, it's Jennie Vaughan. Whether she's guiding her students or her campus, "I get it, because I've been there," she says. "I know what it's like to feel paralyzed. And I know that you can get back on track and thrive."

This is the story of a chancellor, a college, and the challenges both have overcome.



Chancellor Jennie Vaughan (second from left) with international students (l-r) Meshach Sears, Monica Cerezo, and Chen Zhang.



The first Ivy Tech campus at the Westbury strip mall on West Arlington Road. Photo by Daniel Morgan



2000 — Connie Ferguson joined the Ivy Tech-Bloomington board.



2001 — John Whitehart became chancellor and served for 12 years. Photo by Steve Raymer

Meet Jennie Sterling

The year is 1979. The playlist: Go-Go’s, Pretenders, and The Psychedelic Furs. Eighteen-year-old Jennie Sterling has left her childhood home in Phoenix, Arizona, to join two older sisters at their “Condo in Redondo” in the heart of Los Angeles.

The eighth of nine children, she has profited from the increasing success of her parents’ electrical contracting business, which has lately taken on such prestigious jobs as wiring Revlon’s first automated cosmetics assembly line. While her family’s modest beginnings meant that Jennie shared a bedroom with sisters Trish and Trina, as a teenager she has enjoyed her own car, credit card, and now fully paid tuition at the Doheny Campus of Mount St. Mary’s College.

Studiosness, however, has never been Jennie’s strong suit. An effortless B student in high school, she avoided her textbooks, instead focusing her considerable energy on social activities like running for class president and performing as Steve Martin (complete with white suit and banjo) for her senior class. Starting with her post as a crossing guard at age 8 and progressing to directing her fellow sixth graders through hair-curling exercises each morning, she established herself among friends and family as the go-to organizer and party planner. And if that meant the occasional scolding from the sisters at her Catholic school when she missed class for a more pressing engagement, Jennie knew not to take it personally.

“I wasn’t a troublemaker,” she says, looking back. “I just liked a party.”

As excited as she was to leave home and start college, university courses turned out to be a bit of a drag for this social butterfly. Sitting in French class held far less appeal than visiting the nearby frat houses at the University of Southern California. By the end of the semester, Jennie had drawn the conclusion that there was too much fun to be had in LA to waste time on a degree.

“I wanted go out with friends rather than sit in a library studying,” she says. “At the time, a lot of people my age didn’t go to college, so it didn’t seem that crucial. I figured I’d go back at some point, but right then I just wanted to have fun.”

The party’s over

What Jennie didn’t count on was that her father, Jim, a former U.S. Army lieutenant who was happy to support his children receiving the higher education he never had, was not on board with funding a full-time schedule of socializing. Having purchased the condo as an alternative to university housing for Jennie, Trish, and their older sister Mary Anne, he decided to clarify his position with an unscheduled visit to LA.

“I came home one day and he was in the living room,” Jennie remembers. “He said, “This isn’t working



out. You’re done.’ He kicked me out, and then he got in my car and drove it home to Phoenix.”

Stunned, outraged, and suddenly broke, Jennie picked up a clerical job at the corporate offices of Thrifty Drug Store and confronted what it meant to be on her own.

“At first I was so angry,” she says. “I thought, ‘I’m never going to talk to my parents again.’ OK, so I was going to bars and partying, but what gave them the right to judge? It took about a year of working and supporting myself to realize that my father was right to cut me off. You can’t just let somebody continue that kind of irresponsible behavior. If he hadn’t done that, I don’t know where I’d be now.”

Working at Thrifty, Jennie came to see that a college education really did confer a professional advantage. Although she proved herself to be a capable, committed employee, she was getting passed over for promotions in favor of colleagues with degrees. Having blown her chance for a “free” education, however, she no longer had the option of dropping everything to start over as a student.

New career in San Francisco

By the mid-1980s, Jennie’s sister Trish had graduated and moved to San Francisco to get her M.B.A. Feeling directionless, Jennie followed, initially living with Trish while she considered her next move.

She wound up in the last place she expected: back on a college campus — only this time as a secretary, working in the University of San Francisco’s office of student affairs.

Jennie at age 18, with her parents, Eileen and Jim. Within a year of this picture being taken, her father, a former Army lieutenant, kicked her out of the “Condo in Redondo” and confiscated her car because of excessive partying. *Courtesy photo*



“One of the big things I did was make videos to teach other employees how to access the new computer system,” she recalls. “This was when personal computers were just emerging and no one understood how to use them. I became the default expert in student information systems just because the technology was so new.”

The beauty of student affairs, it turned out, was its inherent focus on people. Finally, instead of pulling her away from her obligations, Jennie’s extroverted nature helped propel her forward in her career. Within a couple of years, she had become associate registrar, and then director of operations, and by 1994 she was the registrar of the University of San Francisco (USF) with a staff of 15 under her direction.

An earth-shattering event

On October 17, 1989, Jennie had just returned to her apartment across the street from campus when everything started to shake.

“All of a sudden my refrigerator was in the middle of the kitchen. Everything I had, all the knick-knacks, were

(clockwise from top left) Jennie’s second grade picture; at age 12 with snowman at the family’s vacation cabin in northern Arizona; with parents in San Francisco, age 19; Easter Sunday (l-r) Trina, Mary Anne, Trish, Michael, 2-year-old Jennie, and Tim. *Courtesy photos*



falling around me. I lived on the top story of my apartment building, and I was scared to death,” she says.

Jennie rushed down the stairs and outside, where fires were raging and the whole city, it seemed, had lost power. The 6.9-magnitude Loma Prieta earthquake knocked down bridges and buildings, killed 63 people, and injured nearly 4,000 more. With the devastation all around her, Jennie fled to Trish’s house, where she spent the evening on the phone with her father as he relayed television reports.

At the end of the night, when it felt safe to do so, she headed back home, but noticed the lights were on at USF. Instead of going to bed, she crossed the street to work, where she found the university president and a small collection of staff clustered around a generator-powered TV.

“I came in and joined them, and the discussion was all about what we would do for the students,” she remembers. “We literally stayed up all night. In the morning I walked over and opened up the registrar’s office and I just sat there and tried to answer questions as best I could.”

The shock of the experience, coupled with the sudden knowledge of the city’s fragility and interdependence, caused a seismic shift in Jennie as well.

“I became an adult overnight,” she says.

Love on first night

It was in this newly mature state that Jennie agreed, one week later, to go on a blind double date. Driving her old Ford van, Jennie picked up her friend and her friend’s date along with one Neville Vaughan, a 24-year-old deep-sea fisherman from Northern Ireland who was killing time in San Francisco while his boat was being repaired.

They drove to Oakland — avoiding the collapsed Bay Bridge — to hear the Eurhythmics play “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” and “Here Comes the Rain Again.” But once Jennie and Neville started talking in the downstairs bar, Annie Lennox was forgotten.

“We never made it to the concert,” declaims Neville in his all-but-impenetrable Belfast brogue. “The next day we went all over San Francisco. We’ve been together ever since. I was planning to head back to Ireland before I met Jennie, but I just couldn’t go. She was too much fun.”

Had she met Neville before the earthquake, she might not have been ready to jump into such a serious relationship, Jennie says. But with her newfound clarity, she had no hesitation about moving in together. Her father’s sudden and severe lung infection, which quickly claimed his life, was a devastating loss that further accelerated her readiness to start her own family.

Soon Neville and Jennie were married, she was pregnant, and her long-delayed bachelor’s degree became a more urgent concern.

Graduating at 33

“I had been taking a class here and there, but when I got pregnant I thought, ‘OK, now I’ve got to get serious,’” she says.

“I wound up carrying a full load of classes while I was working full time. I remember being completely hysterical in stats class, so exhausted and hormonal and trying to handle math, which is my worst subject.”

With Neville’s support, Jennie pressed on, even through the sleep-deprived fog of new motherhood. At last, in 1994, with a two-and-a-half-year-old son, Keagan, on her hip, she accepted her Bachelor of Science in Organizational Behavior from the University of San Francisco. She was 33 years old.

“It was wonderful to finally graduate, but in hindsight, had I known how hard it would be to go back to school as a working parent, I definitely would have stuck with it the first time,” she says. “This is what I’m always trying to get across to my students: Do this now, because it’s not going to get any easier.”

Bloomington bound

After Jennie graduated, Neville took his turn in school, earning his credential as a paralegal. Yet while the Vaughans were thriving professionally, their salaries were no match for Internet-boom-induced housing prices.

“I thought we’d be in San Francisco forever. But the dot-com boom changed everything,” Jennie says. “We were never going to afford a house. Never. If we wanted Keagan to grow up with space and a yard we’d have to find another place to do it.”

By this time, sister Trish and her two sons had relocated to Bloomington, near the children’s father’s family. As soon as she sensed Jennie wavering on her commitment to California, Trish marshaled all her big-sister powers of persuasion.

“I talked them into moving here for completely selfish reasons,” she says. “I wanted her closer to me. I wanted us to be able to help each other with the kids. The idea that they wouldn’t grow up together just broke my heart.”

Taking an enormous leap of faith in the spring of 1997, Jennie and Neville quit their jobs, hitched up their station wagon, and tossed the cat, dog, and Keagan into the cab of a U-Haul truck.

“Those are some of my first memories,” says Keagan, who was 5 at the time. “My mom wouldn’t let my dad drive, so he drew me pictures. I remember at one point we were trying to get up a hill, and the truck was struggling so much we had to turn the AC off to conserve power.”

After a 2,300-mile journey, during which the cat ran away and the dog chewed off the car’s



(l-r) Jennie with son, Keagan, 22, and husband, Neville, at home. Keagan is off to do graduate work at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Jennie’s mentor, former Chancellor John Whikehart. Photo by Steve Raymer

Jennie joined Ivy Tech as its admissions and financial aid coordinator, the Bloomington branch also gained a crucial board member: Connie Ferguson.

“Our big dream at the time was just to have our own building,” says Connie, who has chaired the Ivy Tech–Bloomington board for the past 14 years. “We could also see incredible potential for partnerships with Indiana University, but as a branch without autonomy, we were limited in what we could do.”

Meet your mentor

It wasn’t long before Ivy Tech’s registrar position opened up and Jennie was pegged to fill it. Neville, meanwhile, landed his dream job as a Bloomington firefighter, and the Vaughans found a home in the Arden Place neighborhood of south-central Bloomington — complete with the long-desired backyard. Trish’s wish to have her two boys and Keagan grow up together was coming true as well, with the sisters taking turns chauffeuring the young trio to activities and Neville starting an annual tradition of a guys-only camping trip.

‘IT WAS VERY OBVIOUS TO ME THAT JENNIE WAS A LEADER...’

—John Whikehart



Ivy Tech State Board made Bloomington its own region, John’s appointment as chancellor in 2001 began a process of transformation from an isolated branch campus to a comprehensive community college closely integrated with the city and surrounding area. Once John had explained his presence to Jennie, they quickly became a dynamic team.

“It was obvious to me from the very beginning that Jennie was a leader,” John says. “She is not only very energetic and enthusiastic but also completely student centered, and she has an amazing ability to engage people. From the start, she was a key member of my leadership team. She was there when every decision was being made and I sought her counsel on everything we did.”

“We hit it off like, boom,” Jennie says. “It was incredible watching John and seeing the difference he made for the campus. Every day I was learning something new.”

New site, new start

The first significant shift occurred in 2002, when a \$23 million state appropriation enabled Ivy Tech–Bloomington to build its current 144,000-square-foot facility on Daniels Way.

“I was one of the first people to move into the new building,” Jennie remembers. “We got the whole place settled and ready for the students to walk in. It was an amazing time on the campus. You could totally feel the anticipation. I thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m at the beginning of something huge.’”

“Going from what had been a shopping center to a very nice, well-appointed building prompted us to reframe our role as an institution,” John says. “We made a very conscious decision to recognize that the building was not a gift from our state or our communities but an investment in our students.”

Under John’s leadership, the campus set out four goals: ensure the success of individual learners, respond to the workforce needs of local employers, provide seamless educational transitions from high school and into four-year programs, and engage with the local community through service and outreach.

With respect to the third goal, signing a transfer agreement with Indiana University was a tremendous coup. Says Connie, “Prior to the articulation agreement, there was no guarantee that you wouldn’t have to double your classes if you transferred from Ivy Tech to IU. Once we got that agreement in place, it made a huge difference in what happened to our students. They could have the benefit of starting out with smaller, more individualized classes and know that when they were ready for a larger university, those credits were going to count.”

The community engagement effort also took off in the ensuing years. Starting with the Center for Civic Engagement in 2004, Ivy Tech–Bloomington began building “centers of excellence” focused on partnering with public, private, and nonprofit institutions to pursue community priorities ranging from supporting the arts to encouraging economic development. By 2010, the campus had added The Center for Lifelong Learning, the Indiana Center for the Life Sciences, the Gayle & Bill Cook Center for Entrepreneurship, and the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center.

Paying it forward

Jennie was also advancing, moving up from her registrar position to become assistant dean for

JESSICA STRUNK



“Jennie instilled a strong work ethic and positivity about what we were doing that is now second nature for me,” says Jessica Strunk, who had been working in a factory refurbishing cellphones and is now the Ivy Tech registrar. Photo by Lynae Sowinski

enrollment services. Once again, however, she hit a professional ceiling due to the lack of an advanced degree.

“In 2006, the human resources director position became available,” she says. “I told John, ‘I want this job,’ and he said, ‘I think you’d be really good, but you’ve got to get your master’s.’”

Jennie had, in fact, completed all the coursework for a master’s degree when she was still in California but had stalled on writing her final thesis. As the months turned into years, the task had seemed increasingly insurmountable, until finally the grace period for completion elapsed.

Ten years later, at John’s insistence, with a demanding job and a teenager at home, Jennie enrolled online in the Master of Public Administration program at American Military University. This time she stuck with it, and finally, at the age of 49, she completed her master’s degree.

Jennie’s struggle to stay on track with her education made her doubly determined to help Ivy Tech students focus on their goals. Whether that involved taking calls from sobbing freshmen on the weekends or talking prospective students step by step through the application process, she made herself entirely available,

recalls Jessica Strunk, who came to work for Jennie in the registrar’s office through the federally funded work-study program.

“Seeing her devotion really affected the way I thought about my own future,” Jessica says. “Before I came to Ivy Tech, I had been working in a factory refurbishing cellphones. I hadn’t thought of work as something that you could be so passionate about. Jennie instilled a strong work ethic and positivity about what we were doing that is now second nature for me. She did so much to guide me and create opportunities, and I know she was doing that for every student who came through.”

Jessica is now Ivy Tech’s registrar, and says she can envision herself someday becoming a vice chancellor or dean of student affairs.

“Everybody has a story like that about how Jennie has helped them in one way or another,” says Jennie’s younger sister, Trina, who moved to Bloomington in 1999, completing the set of childhood roommates. “When our mother got sick during a visit and needed to go to the hospital, we were suddenly surrounded by nurses who couldn’t wait to meet Jennie Vaughan’s mom. They had been students at Ivy Tech and they all said Jennie made a huge difference for them.”

Community minded

Even as she took on direct responsibility for both student affairs and human resources, Jennie was also becoming involved with community organizations such as Bloomington’s Local Council of Women and Stepping Stones, a transitional housing program for youth experiencing homelessness.

With Neville rising in the firefighting ranks to become captain of Fire Station No. 5, Jennie also was a charter member of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Bloomington Fire Department. And, true to her party-planning nature, she took on responsibility for her neighborhood’s annual Fourth of July bash.

“Both Jennie and Neville are really community-minded people,” observes Connie. “They have this tireless energy and it’s always focused outward.”

Jennie’s mother, Eileen (now 92), notes that this attribute is her strongest point of pride about her daughter. “If Jennie can do something for you or help you go a step higher, she will. That’s the thing I’m really proud of with all my kids. They care for their fellow man.”

Keagan, who is now a 22-year-old Ball State University graduate headed to the London School of Economics and Political Science for graduate school, echoes his grandmother’s

sentiment. “Both of my parents have devoted their lives to public service,” he says. “They gave me the gift of showing me that it’s possible to make an impact.”

A shocking merge

Jennie continued serving under John Whikehart for 12 years, until he left Ivy Tech this January to become Bloomington’s deputy mayor. At his retirement party, John recalls, Ivy Tech President Tom Snyder said he would begin a search for John’s replacement — which is one reason it came as a surprise when the Ivy Tech State Board announced in February that they would merge Bloomington with Evansville.

“It was pretty well known that the college administration was leaning toward the idea of merging campuses, and that the opportunities to do that would come as chancellors retired,” admits John, “but Bloomington always believed that it would remain as a stand-alone campus because of how unique it is within the system.”

The campus’ most distinguishing feature, John explains, is its transfer agreement with IU Bloomington. “We have such a strong relationship with IU’s flagship campus that 60 percent of our enrollment is transfer-bound students who plan to go to Indiana University,” he says. “We are a magnet campus drawing students from 80 of Indiana’s 92 counties with the intent to transfer to IU. That does not exist at the other campuses.”

The centers for excellence are another feature unique to Ivy Tech’s Bloomington campus, he adds, as are its biotechnology and radiation therapy programs.

Moreover, from Connie Ferguson’s standpoint, the campus’ consistent growth from 2,100 students at the Westbury location to more than 6,500 students last semester made the clear case for continuing on the existing trajectory.

“We weren’t broken,” she asserts. “You don’t try to fix something if it’s not broken. We had been on this fabulous journey ever since we became our own region, and our enrollments kept booming up and up. I was totally shocked, to be honest. And I have to admit that it was very upsetting that the regional board was never formally consulted on this plan.”

‘When it’s the right thing, you do it.’

The more Connie looked into the decision, the more uneasy she became. “I started inquiring with the other regional board members, and several of us met with the president. But after that conversation we felt more concern rather than less,” she says. “Dividing one chancellor



(back, l-r) Trina, Mary Anne, Jennie, Trish, and (front) Eileen at a party in May to celebrate Keagan’s graduation from Ball State University and Trish’s son Andrew’s graduation from Indiana University. Mary Anne and Eileen still live in Phoenix. Courtesy photo

over a region spanning more than a hundred miles didn’t sound like a good move for our campus, especially with so many initiatives that are unique to our region.”

Every morning, Connie recalls, she woke up with renewed conviction that the Bloomington region should remain intact. Although she knew there was little chance of undoing a state board decision, “It just didn’t seem right if we didn’t at least let our voice be heard. When it’s the right thing, you do it. I wouldn’t feel that I was doing my job if I didn’t keep trying.”

Meanwhile, back on campus, stress levels were stratospheric. “Suddenly they tell us we’re merging,” Jennie remembers. “What does that mean? They don’t need two of me? We were all scared. We were getting our resumes ready, preparing to be sent away from this wonderful place we’d created. All these students’ lives we’ve been changing, it felt like it was all going to go.”

In that moment of crisis, Jennie made a decision. Although she had never aspired to be chancellor, the thought of the campus being led from a distance made her realize what she could offer Ivy Tech.

“I know the heart of that campus,” she says. “You can’t make a small place like that work without knowing everybody. I realized that if I wanted us to continue on the journey John started I was going to have to step up. I knew our wonderful trustees were out there every day

fighting for our campus, and I decided if the job became available I was going to go for it.”

When the time came for the next state board meeting in April, all of Ivy Tech–Bloomington’s administration was on edge. Connie and the other regional trustees forcefully, passionately, spoke their minds. But would the board reconsider? Or was it the end of an era of independence?

In what felt like a miracle, the board issued a reversal of their earlier decision to merge the two campuses. “Fairy tales do come true,” Connie says. “The state board really did listen and hear us out. They even complimented our regional board for our passion and how much we care.”

Chancellor Vaughan

With the campus’ autonomy secured, the search was on for a new chancellor. Though it took Jennie out of her comfort zone, accustomed as she was to a behind-the-scenes role, she worked up her courage and applied.

“Going in for the interview, I was beyond nervous,” she says. “I was in the parking lot thinking, ‘Holy cow, how am I going to convince them that I’m not still that scattered 17-year-old?’”

Once she got in front of the panel, however, she had no trouble conveying her dedication and expertise.

“Jennie really did shine in her passion at the interview,” says Connie, who was a member of the search committee. “We could see how knowledgeable she was about all aspects of the college. She has given her life to higher education, and she’s just so personable with the students. She’s right there elbow to elbow with them every day.”

‘IF JENNIE CAN DO SOMETHING FOR YOU OR HELP YOU GET A STEP HIGHER, SHE WILL.’
—Jennie’s mother, Eileen Sterling

“Jennie has the ability, and she has the support of the campus,” adds John. “She also has the personal skills to engage the community and help the campus continue to grow.”

Just two weeks after the state board restored Bloomington as a stand-alone campus, Jennie Vaughan became the region’s new chancellor.

“It’s being left in good hands, because I love everything about this place,” she says. “We were paralyzed, but no longer. We’re ready to rock and roll.”

Hitting the ground running

Since Jennie was named chancellor on April 24, she’s been racing to meetings, events, and media interviews at a breakneck pace. In addition to preparing for the fall semester, the campus is set to complete a nearly 90,000-square-foot addition to the Connie and Steve Ferguson Academic Building (an honor Ivy Tech conferred on the couple to recognize their many years of philanthropic and volunteer service). To finance the expansion, the campus is also poised to embark on a capital campaign led by John Whikehart and Connie Ferguson.

“For the first time in 12 years, I’ll be working for Jennie,” jokes John.

Jennie’s other priority for the coming year is to spotlight the strengths of Ivy Tech–Bloomington’s faculty members, who now number close to 100.

“I’m declaring this the year of the faculty,” she says. “We need to get the word out about these amazing people. Not only are they extremely accomplished and qualified, but they also love what they do. They are teaching five classes per semester and their doors are always open to students. The quality of the education they are providing is what makes this campus a first choice.”

Despite the long days and hectic schedule, Jennie says she is feeling energized by the constant interaction — as is Neville, nicknamed “First Dude” by the Ivy Tech security staff.

“I’m loving it. I get to go to all these events and just tag along,” he says. “It’s right up my alley, getting out and socializing, but I’m also there to support Jennie.”

A constant mentor

Although her role at Ivy Tech has shifted substantially, Jennie still plans to be available to individual students whenever they need her, she says. That goes for nights and weekends — and even dates with Neville, like the baseball game they attended two years ago at Cincinnati’s Great American Ball Park.

“We were there to see the Giants play the Reds. That’s our special thing to do together because we’re huge Giants fans,” she says. “There was a kid sitting next to us with his girlfriend, and I’m razzing him because he’s cheering for the Reds. And it turns out he had been a student at Ivy Tech and dropped out.”

The young man was Tom Lessard, a Bloomington native who had initially attended Millikin University in Illinois to play football, but moved back home a year later after injuring his knee. He spent three semesters at Ivy Tech — changing his major every semester — before calling it quits and going to work for Bloomington Hospital washing dishes in the cafeteria.

‘WHEN IT’S THE RIGHT
THING, YOU DO IT.
I WOULDN’T FEEL THAT I
WAS DOING MY JOB IF I
DIDN’T KEEP TRYING.’

—Connie Ferguson

Chancellor Jennie Vaughan and board chair Connie Ferguson look to a bright future for Ivy Tech.

TOM LESSARD



Tom Lessard, a college dropout and dishwasher, happened to be sitting next to Jennie at a baseball game in Cincinnati. During the game, she talked him into going back to school at Ivy Tech. *Photo by Lynae Sowinski*

He was 25 when he met Jennie, and had been out of school almost four years. “Once you hit your mid-20s and you haven’t finished school you start to wonder what’s wrong with you,” he says. “But Jennie started telling me how she didn’t get her degree until she was in her 30s and was still able to have a great career. We talked through that whole game. It was so cool to see how her life turned out. I realized we had very similar stories. In the course of that conversation she got me to go back to school.”

Tom is now almost finished with his associate degree in business and hospitality management, and is already using those skills as manager of the Bloomington Country Club’s restaurant and bar. He plans to transfer to IU after he graduates from Ivy Tech to complete a bachelor’s degree in the tourism and hospitality field.

“I would love to be a general manager of a country club or resort someday,” Tom says. “Jennie opened my eyes to what’s possible. I’m still talking with her a lot and bouncing ideas off her. And she’ll do that for anyone, anywhere. It doesn’t matter if she’s the head honcho. She’ll still go out of her way to help you. She’s the bomb.” ✨