

# Dr. Degrassi: Following Her Own Path

By Kasey Dutrow

I met with Dr. Allyson Degrassi over Zoom as she sat relaxed on her grey couch with the sounds of her child practicing violin in the background. “I’m in a meeting!” she called before saying she could continue practicing, and that it would be nice background noise. Her bubbly demeanor and excitement are immediately apparent.

Dr. D, as known by her students and Ally to her peers, has been my professor for two years now. She immediately stood out to me because of her candor and openness. Along with that, she was a nontraditional student, just like me. “I really want to mentor, to not just teach a class and walk away. I think that’s super important because all these students they look at you like you know everything and it’s so false.” Dr. Degrassi has always been very open about her schooling, and her decision to return to school after working many years in many different jobs at some points even working 4 at a time.

*“I have always had a job since the age of 12-13 and not just like babysitting and stuff like that I was working at the courthouse, filing and doing clerical work, and ... I worked at like Mail Boxes etc., TJ Maxx, a curtain factory inspector, I sold Kirby vacuum cleaners, home cleaning systems, I worked in a deli, I waited tables I did all sorts of stuff”*



Dr. Degrassi mans the grill at the Environmental Studies department's end of semester cookout. Photo courtesy Environmental Studies Facebook page.

Degrassi returned to school after meeting her husband, who has the Italian equivalent of a Master's degree. When asked what made her decide to go back to

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school she said, “I guess it had to do with actually being given a chance.” She had moved a lot as a kid, and when it came time for her to graduate she learned she didn’t have enough credits to earn her diploma. “I only had enough units or completed enough classes to be a

freshman,” She said while shaking her head, “and I was 17, I was like so you want me to graduate when I’m 21?!” Degrassi opted for a GED instead.



Dr. Degrassi with friends at graduation. Photo courtesy of Dr. Degrassi

She mentioned several times that she never thought she was smart enough to go to college. Despite her doubts, Degrassi received her Bachelor’s degree at 27, noting it wasn’t until that year that she found out she had a learning disability. “I just fell in love with learning,” she says, “and since I had the learning disability everybody thought I was kind of dumb.” Degrassi quickly made it known that she was not dumb, making the Dean’s list every semester and being invited to “smart people clubs” as she called it. Among her accomplishments, she was accepted into the National Science Foundation’s undergraduate research and mentor in biology program. With this, she was able to do research and got paid to do it. “I loved it, I was just thriving,” She said about the experience.

At this point, Degrassi earned respect from her professors and they mentioned she should consider graduate school. “I was like oh no, no, no,” she said again, referencing she didn’t think she was smart enough. But when



Degrassi studies at her workspace. Photo courtesy Dr. Degrassi



she started getting accepted with a full scholarship to all the schools she applied to, she decided to give it a shot. “I just kept doing everything that I absolutely love doing, and then when it came down to what kind of career I wanted after I had my Ph.D. it was like a no-brainer,” said Degrassi. She had loved teaching while working on her degrees, and not just the research. She loved the impact she had on her students. “You can tell she’s super passionate and knowledgeable about the subjects she teaches,” mentioned Mackenzie Vadnais, a Senior student of Degrassi, “she makes it more fun to learn in her classes.”

Degrassi battled with imposter syndrome her entire life, including now, though she says she’s gotten better with it. Reflecting on her love of learning, she still feels like she has so much to learn about her subjects, but she tries not to let that stop her confidence in what she does know. “I wish people would, everybody remember, it’s like, you know what you know and you can say what you don’t and it’s not going to be a problem”



Dr. Degrassi researching field mice with fellow students.  
Photo courtesy of Dr. Degrassi

We spoke of the challenges non-traditional learners face compared to the average college student. I asked if she ever felt out of place because of her age difference from the other undergraduates, “I thought that at first that it would matter to them that I was so much older, like they wouldn’t want to talk around me or you know

things like that, but they didn't.' She says smiling, "I like to have fun and I'm real cheesy." Degrassi attributes this to her ability to fit in. Although socially she did great, she did admit that non-traditional students face numerous challenges outside of school that other students don't have. "I wish that people would recognize those other challenges," she mentions nodding her head. "I have to take care of my child or I have to work or there's always somebody depending on you that is more than just, you know, academic. And I think it's really sad that people don't recognize that and they have the same expectations for due dates and things like that." I spoke to another student of Degrassi's, Marshall Edney, an SU student support specialist who is taking classes for fun after receiving her Master's degree in 2020. "Dr. Degrassi knew that my daughter was sick and was extremely accommodating and understanding." said Edney when asked if she ever struggled with balancing parenting, work, and assignments, "She offered to let me Zoom into class and send me the materials. I never even had to ask."

Degrassi has been teaching at Shenandoah University as an assistant professor in the Environmental Science and Biology departments since 2019. Degrassi mentioned

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that so many students have a problem with changing majors, deciding to leave, or deciding to come back. She believes they probably went through the same self-doubts she did. To that, she says, "You can do it, you just have to be brave."



Dr. Degrassi at graduation. Photo courtesy of Dr. Degrassi