



Pillar & Post

Creating Futures – Honoring Loved Ones

Dan Wilson and his wife, Marlene, moved to southern Colorado in 2012. “I’d been an automotive instructor at a college in Denver, but my wife and I were ready for a change. We had some property in the woods near Trinidad and wanted to move there to enjoy that lifestyle.”



Denver’s loss became Trinidad State’s gain, as Dan quickly became a valued staff member. In addition to his teaching expertise, he also brought a special interest in working with students that arrived with challenging backgrounds.

“I’ve always had a passion for students who were struggling—those who maybe didn’t quite believe in themselves,” Dan explained. “Or those students who maybe didn’t have the best work ethic. It’s never just about the education, although that’s necessary. It’s also the chance to help someone develop the life skills that lead to success.”

After joining Trinidad State, Dan’s interest in these students opened up a role as Disability Services Coordinator. “I would work to identify a student’s individual needs, whether it be a classroom accommodation or identifying a learning deficit. We wanted to level the educational playing field.”

“A lot of these kids arrive after being told ‘No’ all their lives—that they couldn’t do it,” he said. “But I never told them no. I told them they could do it, but they’d need to work hard.”

The memory of one student stood out.

“I was visiting one of the high schools, and there was a special education student that wanted to enroll in our automotive program. I’d been invited to explain the application process, and what he could expect when he arrived on campus.”

“It was clear he would face some challenges,” Dan continued. “I helped arrange some testing to better evaluate his learning needs—and the hands-on support we could provide. This kid tested at a 1st grade reading level.”

“It gave us pause, but he was motivated—he really wanted it.”

“Trinidad State accepted him, and we arranged for a lighter class load during his first semester. We also provided support through our Adult Education program. By the end of his second semester, this student was reading at an 8th grade level—and he went on to complete the automotive program!”

“His success was huge, but it’s a Trinidad State story too. His hard work was noticed by his classmates, who were totally impressed. It became a great moment. Everyone came together in a huge way.”

Dan then shared a second story involving a husband and wife who both enrolled in the heavy equipment program. “They were homeless at the time, but he arrived at Trinidad State ready to turn their lives around. They put in the work and graduated from the program, and they are no longer homeless.”

“Today, I’m grateful to call them friends,” Dan added. “And I’m grateful I’ve been able to maintain relationships with many other former students, too.”



In 2022, Dan transitioned from a full-time role into a 2-day per week schedule. His focus became Trinidad State’s technical programs, with a specific emphasis on the Line Technology program. “Our students learn to climb poles and do everything needed to keep power moving.”

“Trinidad State is particularly good on the career technical side,” he explained. “We’re the ‘go to’ for these careers. With Line Tech, we work hand in hand with Colorado Springs Utilities to provide a program that opens doors for quality employment.”

“It’s an incredible opportunity for students to find a career path and move forward in life.”

“We typically start with approximately 35 Line Tech students,” Dan explained. “During the first week or so, students figure out if it’s the right program for them. We might lose a few early, but our persistence to graduation is strong. We typically graduate about 30 students into well-paying jobs.”

Dan’s role within this program includes student recruitment, support with admission and registration, helping identify any necessary financial aid, and ensuring they have books and tools. “It’s pretty much everything needed to make sure each student is ready.”

His efforts also include post-graduation support, including mock interviews, resume preparation, and preparing for job searches.

“We get students immediately after high school, but we also have students that are making a mid-career transition,” he said.

“Helping students, it’s just a very special place for me. Seeing them discover things inside themselves they didn’t know were there—it turns a person’s life around.”

“And you know what? I have a similar story.”

“Until I was about 35, I’d been a miner and a logger,” he said. “But I hit a crossroad—and it motivated me to go back to school where I earned my degree in Automotive Technology. This was a life-changing decision for me. It opened the door to a career in education that otherwise would not have been available.”

“Helping students, it’s just a very special place for me,” Dan said. “Seeing them achieve goals and build self-confidence is incredibly rewarding. Seeing them discover things inside themselves they didn’t know were there—it turns a person’s life around.”



Dan first approached Trinidad State about a legacy gift in the summer of 2022, after his family had suffered two recent losses. He was seeking a way to honor and remember people whom he loved and cherished.

“Marlene and I lost a niece and nephew within about a month of one another,” he said. “It was hard on our family—but especially so, since Stephanie and Nick were both taking important steps forward in their lives.”

“In some ways, their lives mirrored those of some of our students—where a person might not start on a solid career path, but who reach that crossroad and begin moving toward a better future. Stephanie and Nick were well on their way to writing their ‘comeback’ stories.”



“After everything happened,” he added, “we started thinking about how we could honor them.”

As Dan explained, he and Marlene had arranged their estate plan to provide for all living nieces and nephews in equal shares. Should any of them predecease the others, their shares would be added back to the gifts for those who remained.

“The idea to change our plans came up after we lost Stephanie,” he explained. “I’d seen information about

scholarships, and we started wondering if we could change things to honor her memory. Then Nick died and I contacted Toni DeAngelis to make scholarships in their memories a reality.”

Dan and Marlene have now created a legacy gift that will fund a permanent scholarship for students in Career & Technical Education programs. This scholarship will support low-income students and/or those with a disability, or a Veteran, or those seeking education after a period of incarceration.

“Trinidad State is so well-positioned to work with these types of students,” Dan said. “About 80% qualify for Pell grants. Financial aid can be the bridge to help people who are ready to make something of their lives—who are ready to put in the work. I don’t know of any other school that works as hard as Trinidad State does to support these students.”

“Connecting all this back to Nick and Stephanie means so much to me,” he added. “We’re creating a legacy in their names to help others succeed in life. We’re taking a difficult situation and turning it into something positive for others. This opportunity means the world to me.”

Trinidad State is grateful for the generosity of Dan and Marlene Wilson. To learn more about legacy gifts, please contact Toni DeAngelis at toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu or 719-846-5520.

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“Creating this gift has been good therapy. I guess I’m also hopeful that our story might resonate with someone else too,” he added. “When you work with a student who’s been told so many times, ‘you can’t do it,’ and they put in the work—they overcome the odds? It’s amazing.”

“We chose to honor Stephanie and Nick, knowing they’ll be permanently connected to helping others. And if another person decides to create a legacy gift too, I hope they’ll enjoy the same good feelings that we do.”