

Western Foundation

GRATITUDE REPORT

Maura Abbs Rises Above Adversity

From a young age, Maura Abbs knew she was meant to care for people. She became a Certified Nursing Assistant at 16, drawn to roles where compassion matters most—where a steady hand, a patient voice, or a moment of dignity can change someone's day. She pictured a future built around helping others feel safe, seen, and supported.

At the same time her career path was taking shape, her life changed in a way she never expected: Maura became a mother.

Almost overnight, people stopped recognizing her potential. Instead, she felt judged, underestimated, and dismissed by those who didn't know her story. The scrutiny was constant—at school, in the community, even within her own circles. But Maura refused to accept the narrow expectations placed on her. She kept moving forward for herself and, most of all, for her daughter.

CHOOSING HERSELF

Maura's journey has been marked by profound courage. She left a domestic violence relationship defined by emotional and physical abuse. She stepped into single motherhood while reclaiming her safety, her stability, and her sense of self. During that time, she balanced school, working fulltime, all while raising a bright, spirited little girl who is now four years old. Through determination and healing, Maura found her voice again. She has shaped a life and future on her own terms, and who she is becoming. Her purpose has only deepened. Maura hopes to become a mental health nurse, offering the kind of patient, judgment-free care she once needed herself. "I know what it feels like to be unseen," she shares. "I want to be the person who shows others that they matter."

THE WEIGHT SHE CARRIES—AND WHAT HELPS LIFT IT

While pursuing her nursing degree, Maura shoulders the full load of being both a single parent and a full-time student. Financial strain is constant: childcare costs, unexpected expenses, transportation challenges, and the daily pressure of providing for her daughter. These are the kinds of barriers that quietly, relentlessly push many students off their educational path.



Support from donors can change that story. A scholarship would relieve real financial pressure, allowing Maura to stay focused on her classes, manage the demands of parenting, and continue investing in her long-term goals. It also sends a powerful message—that she is seen, that her resilience is recognized, and that her dreams are worth backing.

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A FUTURE OF WONDERFUL PURPOSE

Maura is on track to graduate from Western in Spring 2026. After completing her degree, she plans to become a psychiatric nurse, drawing on both her CNA experience and her lived understanding of trauma, mental illness, and recovery. She plans to serve people navigating some of the darkest chapters of their lives—meeting them with patience, empathy, and unflinching respect.

"I WOULD HAVE STRUGGLED FINANCIALLY THIS SEMESTER. MY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN AMAZING, AND YOU ARE PART OF THE REASON I AM STILL HERE."

Maura chose Western for its affordability, supportive environment, and the flexibility she needed as a single mother. With the continued generosity of donors, her path remains possible. Maura is not simply working toward a degree; she is disproving every assumption that once tried to hold her back. Her story shows what hope, opportunity, and determination can make possible.

When told that sharing her story would open doors for future Western students, she smiled and said, "I sure hope it does."

Thank you

I want to send my most sincere thanks to you for your support during my non-traditional journey through Western's nursing program. I am nearing the end of the ride with graduation looming before

me in April. As I reflect upon the last year, I can say that it has certainly been a great adventure, one full of ups and downs, for both me and my family. In December of 2024, as I was preparing to return to classes after being out of school for nearly 15 years, I told my wife that we would look back a year from now and be amazed at how fast the time has gone. Just last month, and the end of 3rd term, I was able to have that very conversation with her.

Over the past my family experienced more change than just my dedication to my studies. I went from being the sole provider, through a job change late last year and a reduction to very part-time work. My wife returning to the workforce after being at home for 14 years, and my children enrolling in school after only ever being home-schooled. My return to school obviously wasn't the only adventure we embarked on as family.

While there was a great deal of upheaval and an adjustment to a new "normal," one thing that we found stability in was the support we received from the Western Foundation. For that I am deeply thankful. I'll be 48 this summer. Starting a new career path was a bit daunting when I began the process. However, the care and generosity shown from the Foundation carried over in the culture of Western Technical College. I never felt out of place. Rather, I felt welcomed, supported, and encouraged as I moved through the program. This has been an outstanding experience and I am profoundly grateful.

To those who walked with me in this process, my wife and I extend our most sincere thanks. We appreciate your generosity and helping me achieve a goal that I set many years ago.

With gratitude;

Brandon, Sarah, Halo, Aksel, Priya, and Katja Aspenson





Honoring a Lifetime of Service

THE LEGACY OF ELSIE MCDOWELL



the working environment.” It’s rare for someone to shape a workplace simply by being consistently good; Elsie did exactly that.

Elsie grew up in De Soto, Wisconsin, as one of thirteen children—a childhood that taught her early what it meant to share, to support, and to look after others. Her nieces and nephews describe her as the heart of the McDowell family. She never married, but she created a wide-open kind of love that made every child feel like they were her favorite.

In the summers, she hosted out-of-town nieces and nephews in her small apartment on 4th Street—sometimes five kids at a time—without a car and without complaint. Later, in her warm, welcoming

Some people leave a mark by leading from the front. Others do it by showing up, day after day, with kindness, precision, and a sense of responsibility that never wavers. Elsie McDowell was that kind of person. Though many at Western today never had the chance to meet her, her influence still echoes across the decades she spent shaping the College from the inside out. Elsie began her Western journey in 1947, when the institution was still known as the La Crosse Vocational School and payroll was done by hand. Over 52 years, through new buildings, new presidents, and new eras of technology, she remained a steady, grounding presence in the payroll department. She carried out her work with a notable confidence that made the people around her feel steadier, too.

Former President Lee Rasch reflected, “Elsie started at Western three years before I was born. She was liked by everyone she worked with. Her kindness, trustworthiness, and good-natured view on life permeated

“ELSIE STARTED AT WESTERN THREE YEARS BEFORE I WAS BORN. SHE WAS LIKED BY EVERYONE SHE WORKED WITH. HER KINDNESS, TRUSTWORTHINESS, AND GOOD-NATURED VIEW ON LIFE PERMEATED THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT.”

– Former President Lee Rasch

home on Eighth Street, she hosted holiday gatherings that often swelled to forty people. She held the family together with a beautiful and generous heart.

Her family believed in leaving things better than they found them. When the McDowells

Thank you so much for this generous gift. It is so nice to know that there are people out there who are willing to invest in the future of their communities. Please know that I am working diligently in my studies to be a graduate of Western who will make a positive difference.

Thank you, Cormac Balstad



Interested in providing scholarship support for students entering technical careers?

Please contact the Foundation at 608-785-9487 to learn how easy it is!





Above, Elsie's family donated a bluff in De Soto to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy.



From the 1966 LA Yearbook: Serving as "Right Hands" to members of the Administration: Eileen Johnson, Mary Boardman, Dorothy Stromstad, Marian Meinert, Marion Baker, Elsie McDowell, Patricia Peyton.

donated a bluff in De Soto to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Elsie became the point of contact after a relative passed away. It was a thoughtful effort—preserving a place her family cherished and reflecting the knowing stewardship that defined so much of her life.

A LEGACY WOVEN INTO WESTERN'S STORY

When Elsie passed in 2025, her family knew exactly how to honor her: through a scholarship that would help others in the same generous way she supported so many throughout her life and career.

It is a fitting tribute. For more than fifty years, Elsie gave Western her reliability, warmth, and steady devotion. Now, her legacy continues—opening doors for

future students and shaping new stories. Elsie believed in showing up, doing the work well, and caring for people. She lived her values with consistency and heart, and those values now carry her story forward in meaningful ways.

Through the Elsie McDowell Memorial Endowed Funds, her commitment to education and compassion lives on—in students pursuing their goals, in moments when timely support makes all the difference, and in opportunities that might not otherwise be possible. Each scholarship awarded and each basic need met reflects

the same spirit of care and responsibility that defined her life.

Elsie's legacy reminds us that impact takes many forms. Through steadfast service, generosity, and steady leadership, she strengthened Western and its students. Because of her family's generosity, Elsie's story will continue to shape lives and open doors for generations to come.

Article from the Summer 1997 UPgrade Newsletter.



Elsie McDowell, (above and right) WWTC's payroll accountant. McDowell recently celebrated fifty years of employment with the college.

Elsie McDowell

50 Years Of Dedicated Service

Friends, coworkers and retirees braved the extreme cold of Wisconsin winter to attend an open house to congratulate Elsie McDowell on fifty consecutive years of employment with WWTC.

The open house for McDowell, the college's payroll accountant, was held on January 16th, a day the college opened two hours late due to severe weather.

McDowell received recognition at the school's annual January in-service held before the open

house. She received a commendation from WWTC's Board of Directors at their January 21st meeting.

McDowell sees nothing remarkable in her accomplishment. "You do your work each day, and pretty soon the years add up," she claims. "I've had good coworkers, which makes a big difference," she adds.

McDowell, a graduate of Viroqua high school, has provided office support for WWTC since it was the

La Crosse Vocational School. She was hired out of the school's own College of Commerce.



Basic Needs Center: Stability When It Matters Most



College asks a lot of students—and life keeps asking, too. At Western, we see every day that success depends on more than what happens in a classroom. When groceries run short, childcare falls through, transportation breaks down, or an unexpected bill appears, even the most determined students can feel shaken.

The Basic Needs Center exists for these moments. It is more than a space on campus; it is a practical, student-first commitment to ensuring no one has to choose between getting through the week and finishing their education.

Students can stop in for immediate support or complete a simple online request to connect with a team member who guides them step by step—without judgment or red tape.

Why This Work Matters

Behind every student is a full and often complicated life. Many are raising children, working long shifts, or managing unseen stress. Western created the Basic Needs Center because the stories—and the data—were clear: when basic needs are met, students stay enrolled, perform better, and experience improved well-being. Graduation becomes attainable. The Center is already changing trajectories. Students considering stopping out are staying on track. Parents are finding breathing room. Those facing sudden crises are receiving steady support that keeps their goals alive.

Powered by Generosity

Every service offered through the Basic Needs Center is strengthened by donor support. The Basic Needs Campaign fuels food assistance, emergency grants, childcare navigation, disability services, and the many resources that help students regain stability during difficult times.

Because of you, students find not only practical help, but hope, encouragement, and the confidence to keep moving forward.

The Basic Needs Center provides:

- >> Immediate help with food, transportation, emergency funding, and urgent need
- >> Support navigating childcare, housing, and community resources
- >> Access to technology and tools required for coursework
- >> A compassionate, knowledgeable partner who stays involved until the issue is resolved

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION | JULY 2024-JUNE 2025

ASSETS	
Current Assets	\$1,358,375
Investments	\$9,676,303
Other	\$7,724
Total Assets	\$11,042,402

LIABILITIES	
Liabilities	\$2,716
Net Assets	\$11,039,686
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$11,042,402

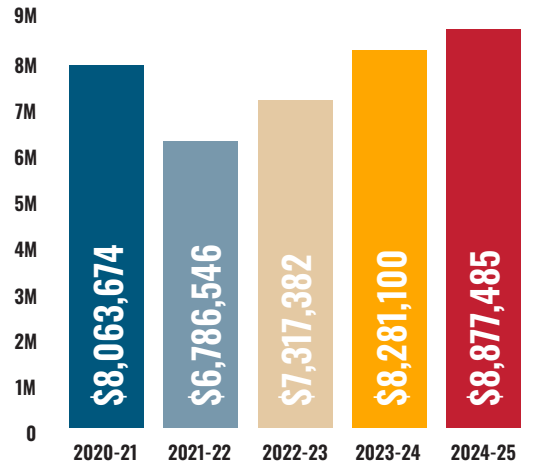
STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

SUPPORT AND REVENUE	
Contributions	\$7,559,436
Investment Income	\$976,947
College in-kind, Rental, Other	\$489,168
Total Support and Revenue	\$9,025,551

EXPENSES	
Awards	\$647,993
Program Support	\$6,170,519
Contracted Services, Other	\$830,009
Total Expenses	\$7,648,521

FUND BALANCE	
Beginning	\$8,281,100
Ending	\$8,877,485

ENDOWMENT FUND BALANCE



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 **\$647,993**
IN SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED

947
SCHOLARSHIPS
AWARDED

\$143,983
awarded in student
emergency funding

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