Linnea Heintz marches during the winter commencement ceremony Dec. 15 at UW-Stout's Johnson Fieldhouse. She received a degree in psychology.

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UW-Stout grad overcomes adversity

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — In 2005 Linnea Heintz slipped on some icy steps at her home and broke her neck. The married mother of three faced several years of rehabilitation, with plenty of time to think.

At age 38 it was a turning point in her life. "I got to thinking, 'What am I going to do with my life?'" she said.

She had been involved in a variety of pursuits, including as a motivational speaker, breeding cattle and working as a nondenominational minister in hospice care facilities.
Heintz realized, however, that she hadn't pursued her passion. In 2010, healthy again and after taking two semesters of technical college courses, she enrolled at UW-Stout and began, at a rapid pace, working toward a four-year degree.

Just 2½ years later she graduated cum laude Saturday, Dec. 15, along with nearly 800 other students - most of them less than half her age - at Johnson Fieldhouse with a bachelor of arts degree in psychology.

At age 45 she's not through with school. A McNair scholar at UW-Stout, Heintz plans to go to graduate school to pursue a doctorate. She is inspired to continue her education and research and make a difference someday either as a university professor or in a medical treatment and research facility.

"I'm determined, and I have the ability to reach people," she said, adding that her career plans have the support of her husband of 22 years, Matt, a trucker, and their children, ages 19, 17 and 15.

Heintz's determination helped her get through the two-hour one-way commute - 1,000 miles a week - to and from campus from their hobby farm in the Rusk County community of Hawkins. She often listened to class lectures in her car to make good use of the time.

She took 22 credits some semesters, or two courses beyond what is considered a full load, and also took classes during interims and summers. Psychology is one of several programs at UW-Stout that has a three-year degree option.

Some of her motivation stems from the death of her father in 1995 at age 51 of colon and liver cancer. Why would an otherwise healthy man suddenly get sick and die in a few months? She believes that his illness was brought on from stress related to his wife's chronic health problems.

"I've been looking at this for 17 years since my father died. I'd like to find a correlation between stress and illness," she said.

Heintz, who grew up on a lake island near Phillips in a home without indoor plumbing, said her mother has suffered for years with a personality disorder. Heintz spent two years in foster homes before joining the military at age 17 and still has little contact with her mother.

Last summer Heintz received a National Science Foundation-funded research experience for undergraduates at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Okla. She worked for two months, under the supervision of OSU Professor Jennifer Byrd-Craven, in a research lab studying stress and immunity.
Heintz helped conduct research for Byrd-Craven and pursued her own research project, "Affiliation: Beneficial or Detrimental to Your Emotions and Your Health," a study that looks at how men and women handle stress differently.

She presented her work in November at a conference in Lake Geneva with psychology Professor Richard Tafalla, faculty research coordinator.

"As a faculty person my job, in part, is to inspire as well as teach. Linnea is one of those rare students I've been inspired by," Tafalla said. "She has been a leader in the McNair program and someone who will surely achieve her goals. She's provided us wonderful memories, and it's truly been a pleasure having her in the program."

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, or McNair Scholars Program, began nationally in 1989 to bring more first-generation college students and disadvantaged groups into higher education. It is named after McNair, a scholar and astronaut who died in the 1986 Challenger space shuttle explosion.