

MSU student Vance Holmes on the verge of achieving dream

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Ten years ago, Vance Holmes' world was turned topsy-turvy.

His mother had died unexpectedly from an aneurysm. Then several months later, Holmes' brother was shot and murdered on the streets of McKeesport, Penn., close to Pittsburgh.

All of which makes his most recent accomplishment – earning a graduate certificate fall semester from Metropolitan State University's School of Urban Education – bittersweet. It is bitter in that neither his mother nor his brother are alive to witness Holmes' quest, but sweet in that he is on the verge of achieving his longtime dream of teaching urban youth.

"I am doing this in part to honor my mother's memory," said Holmes, who lives in downtown Minneapolis. As for his brother, "I think he would be very, very proud of me. He never got to go to college, but he wanted to."

Holmes' accomplishment is not his first brush with higher education. The McKeesport native earned an undergraduate degree in music theater from West Virginia University, Morgantown, in 1985. Five years later, he completed a graduate degree in directing for the theater from the University of Minnesota.

For about a decade afterward, Holmes was an actor, director and choreographer as a full-time permanent company member of the Minneapolis Children's Theater. After that stint, he was a freelance actor, director and choreographer for a number of Twin Cities-area schools and arts organizations, including the Chanhassen Dinner Theater and Penumbra Theater.

Holmes has penned several musicals in his career, including one called the "Jazz Barber of Seville," which was performed in Red Wing and Albert Lea. He describes the musical, an all-African-American version of the opera, "The Barber of Seville," as his proudest accomplishment.

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"It finally happened and was very successful," said Holmes.

Along the way Holmes, also a freelance web designer, launched a website posting pictures and background information on missing college students. That endeavor received considerable attention as Holmes was contacted by some of the students' parents and interviewed by media locally, nationally and even internationally.

Throughout his successful artistic and other efforts, Holmes has long craved teaching. Specifically, he wanted to teach urban youngsters. That passion was immediately apparent to his Metropolitan State instructors and advisor.

"What is most clear above and beyond Vance's extraordinary dedication and impressive work ethic is the powerful drive to make the world better through teaching," said Adela Peskorz, one of his university professors.

"I love going to school," said Holmes. "And I've always wanted to teach. But it's taken awhile to get here."

Holmes said the university's supportive environment and affordability, plus a two-year scholarship from the Metropolitan State University Foundation's Urban Teacher Endowed Scholarship, aided him in his pursuits.

Holmes expects to earn his state teaching license in early 2013, after which he plans to teach English language arts to Twin Cities-area urban youth.

It pains Holmes that his mother and brother are around to bear witness to his achievements. "I really wish that both could be here to see this," said Holmes.