Amy Peterson says that she is an untraditional student of the Montana State University College of Nursing in Great Falls, but then adds, “Well maybe not so untraditional today.” As a single mother in her 30’s, her story is not unusual amongst students who have found that they can complete a four-year program right in their own back yard.
When Peterson discovered she was pregnant she moved from Washington State to live with her family in Great Falls and began to think about her future as a single parent – and the future of her child. It had been 17 years since she graduated from high school, but she knew that her present job paying $8 an hour was not going to cut it anymore. After doing research Peterson decided nursing would meet her financial needs while still allowing flexibility in her schedule to raise her son Shane.

According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, employment of registered nurses is expected to grow 26 percent from 2010 to 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. Adding complexity to the demand, there is a national agenda to increase the number of baccalaureate registered nurses to 80% by 2020. According to MSU statistics the average annual salary for 2009-2010 MSU four-year RN grads was $45,731.

MSU College of Nursing celebrates its 75th anniversary this year and has been a multi-campus college since its inception in 1937. Today there are campuses in Great Falls, Billings, Missoula, and Kalispell in addition to the home campus in Bozeman, which Associate Clinical Professor Sheila Matye says allows students to complete their studies without being uprooted from home, family and job.

The programs attract students of a wide age group and from a variety of situations that includes military family members, single parents, and people looking for a second career. The Great Falls and Bozeman campuses offer an accelerated nursing program that makes it possible for students who already have a bachelor degree in another field to obtain a nursing degree in as little as 14 months. The College of Nursing also offers three graduate nursing degrees allowing students to continue working while doing post-graduate studies. The College’s Caring for our Own Program (CO-OP) supports mentoring for qualified Native American students.

The Great Falls campus has close to 100 students in the under-grad program and an average of six to seven graduate students taught by 25 part and full-time faculty members, providing a high teacher to student ratio.

Students spend over 1200 hours in clinical studies in a variety of facilities including Benefis Health System, rural hospitals, Malmstrom Air Force Base, The Montana State Hospital in Warm Springs and the Great Falls Rescue Mission, which helps them gain a broad base of experiences that helps prepare them for a nursing career and in identifying a specific field where they would like to work. Matye says they take pride in a four-year program that encourages students to dive into research so they understand the reason for the care they administer. She adds, “I have to brag – we have 100% pass rate for the national licensing exam in the past year in Great Falls.”

As for Peterson, she will graduate in December and plans to look for a job in her hometown of Great Falls and is considering attending grad school – also in Great Falls. She says happily, “This program has been wonderfully awesome. I never could have done this without it.”

For more information visit: www.montana.edu/nursing or call: (406) 994-3783

-A love for words and pictures led Kay Bjork to a career as a feature writer and photographer for numerous newspapers and magazines. Her home and family on Swan Lake have been the subject of many of her stories and photographs about their outdoor adventures including skating, skiing and hiking.