

Stephanie (Dolberg) Cannon first stepped onto the Omaha campus of UNMC on Aug. 10.

One day later, the Morrill, Neb., resident received her diploma from the university. She completed her bachelor of science degree in Radiation Science Technology from UNMC without ever coming to UNMC's Omaha campus.

"The faculty at UNMC have gone out of their way to make this a possibility for me," Cannon said. "I'm excited about the new opportunities that this degree will provide for me."

Cannon earned her bachelor's degree while working full time and living in her hometown in western Nebraska. She completed the Computed Tomography and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (CT/MRI) program, one of several advanced certification programs offered by the Division of Radiation Science

Technology Education at UNMC and the first to offer a distance learning opportunity.

James Temme, director of radiation science education at UNMC, said providing more distance-learning opportunities for students throughout the state is a long-term goal of the division.



Stephanie Cannon tries on her graduation robe with help from her husband, Chris.

## FULFILLING a dream STAYING AT HOME



## EDUCATION

by Bill O'Neill

"We feel that it's important to provide these opportunities for the citizens throughout the state, so that they're able to stay in their communities and still receive the same education as if they were in Omaha," Temme said. "There is a very real need out there because of the acute shortage of diagnostic imaging technologists and radiation therapists. This is part of our attempt to help reduce that shortage."

A 1996 graduate of Morrill High School, Cannon said it had been a longtime goal to receive a bachelor's degree. She earned an associate's degree from Western Nebraska Community College upon completion of the radiologic technology program at Regional West Medical Center (RWMC) in Scottsbluff, after which she was hired as a radiologic technologist at RWMC.

Still, she enjoyed performing CT scans and MRI exams, and wanted to get more training in those areas. There was one catch: No place around Scottsbluff offered the training, and Cannon didn't want to leave her family or her then-boyfriend Chris Cannon, a horse trainer who had recently moved back to the area from Texas.

"When he came back from Texas, we decided that we didn't want to have any more of the long-distance relationship stuff," Stephanie Cannon said. The couple married in the summer of 2000.

But Cannon was presented with another option to attain her bachelor's degree. The UNMC radiation science division had found ways to utilize the distance-learning infrastructure that

already existed in the state. The two-way communication satellite system, along with the development of UNMC courses on the Internet and a qualified preceptor in Scottsbluff, helped to persuade officials to give Cannon an opportunity through the long-distance degree program.

Cannon said interacting with faculty members 500 miles away was difficult, initially.

"At first, it was kind of nerve-wracking," she said. "The short delay sometimes made it difficult to offer my input, but it got much better once the professors and I became more comfortable with it ... It's not like being in a classroom, but it's a lot better than the course being on videotape."

Dan Gilbert, the program director of the School of Radiologic Technology at Regional West in Scottsbluff, served as Cannon's preceptor during the program. Gilbert provided the clinical instruction Cannon needed as well as collaborating with UNMC's CT/MRI Education Coordinator, Adam Stevens, to provide her didactic instruction.

"We couldn't have done this without Dan Gilbert's assistance," said Karen Nichols, distance education coordinator for the School of Allied Health Professions at UNMC. "Having a local mentor was a key element of Stephanie's success. It is especially important for distance learning in the clinical setting. Although we delivered much of Stephanie's coursework from Omaha to Scottsbluff, Dan provided clinical and didactic instruction on site."

Said Stevens: "Dan was wonderful to work with, and Stephanie deserves tremendous credit, as well. She was very patient and understanding as we worked out some of the 'kinks' in the system, and she was always dedicated and hard-working."

Temme said distance learning is an important avenue for the university to pursue.

"This is a trend in the industry, and we want to be one of the leaders for distance education," he said. "We wouldn't be able to do this without a dedicated staff and the infrastructure that exists."

For Cannon, the bachelor's degree not only fulfills a goal, but also makes her more marketable.

"With the training, I'm a valuable commodity for any employer," she said. "I could get a job anywhere I want to go." *d*