

# A Mum and a Student at the University Gozo Centre \*

CAROLINE CAMILLERI ROLLS

## Introduction

A dream almost impossible to contemplate? What were the odds of being accepted into a degree course? The opportunity was there. A centre in Gozo, a branch of the University of Malta was offering me the chance to follow a part-time course leading to the Bachelor of Arts Degree on a part-time basis. Was this too good to be true?

In 1999, I was twenty-eight years old and a full-time mum of a three year old boy - Nathan. When I got to know of the chance of being able to read for a degree in Gozo, I grabbed the opportunity. I figured I had everything to gain by trying so I applied. When I was called for the interview I went with much trepidation, fearing that I was not going to be considered eligible to join the course. I was thrilled when I received a positive reply. I started to rally myself up for the upcoming challenge – for a challenge it really was!

## Back to the Classroom

Sitting in the classroom with my fellow students on that first day, I had to fight away the impression that I was in the wrong place. Some of them were much younger than myself. Others had children almost my age and I admired their determination. This heightened my feelings that I could actually succeed.

I had not been in a classroom situation for ten years. At first it was full of the usual 'first day of a new school' feelings. It felt like I was back in Secondary School getting to know my fellow students but eventually we all grouped off into twos and threes as everyone found their niche. After a while, attending class became something to look forward to on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. The camaraderie between the group was always present and there was always a feeling of disappointment when the holidays were upcoming because we would not be meeting for a while.

I felt privileged that so many lecturers were sharing their wealth of knowledge with us. I was taught

by some of the best people I could ever hope to meet. They were always there to offer advice and encouragement.

## A Major Challenge

But if I believed such an undertaking was going to be a challenge, I was right! Learning to manage time was the major obstacle in the whole experience. At the end of the first year, once Nathan had started pre-kinder, I went back to work in a Primary School. Now I had to juggle a full-time job, a child who could go for hours without sleeping, keeping the house from becoming a major disaster zone and my studies.

The major problem was finding enough time to get the assignments done, to study for the end of semester tests and at the same time to avoid chaotic situations in the house! Keeping a four-year-old busy while trying to mentally sort out aspects from the Iliad and understanding microeconomic theories could wear you down, especially if you are hanging out the washing or cleaning the ever present mound of plates in the kitchen at the same time.

Moving into our new house during the first year was probably not a good idea but unfortunately it was better than paying rent on the flat we were occupying. Digging out my lecture notes and assorted books out of unlabelled boxes and onto a make-shift desk under the stairs to get on with my work was my first priority as my first exams were looming. As I had not sat for an exam in over twelve years it was not something I was particularly looking forward to. However, the determination to succeed was there, and so the exams came and went and the time slowly, albeit hectically, went by.

## Managing Time

Eventually I became an expert at managing time. Trying not to deny quality time for Nathan and allocating time for studying and other school work is not an easy task. I had a lot of support from my husband who would make me coffee at all the right times and the cooking was totally within his domain. I would meet some of my fellow students at either their house or mine and we would study together, encouraging each other. And so it went on.

\* This article appeared in the commemorative booklet *The University Gozo Centre: Fifteen Years On*, published by the University Gozo Centre on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of its establishment.

During the third year, the routine had become much easier to handle. However this all went pear-shaped when I became pregnant with our second child. Jamie was born on the 25th of May 2002, during the exam session of the second semester. The day before I went into hospital to give birth, I sat for an hour and a half revising History of Mediterranean Civilisation for the exam, absolutely terrified that the baby would arrive a day early! Thank God he did not! I gave birth the next day and I also passed the exam.



A lecture in progress at the University Gozo Centre

### **Life After School**

We sat for our finals in June 2003. A really frightening prospect - but I put a lot of energy and determination into preparing for them. The exams came and went as do most things in life. The problem now was that it was all over. Suddenly my life seemed rather empty without the constant occupation of studying and writing assignments. It is true that I had two young children which took a lot out of my time, but when they went off to bed I found myself wondering what to do with myself. I missed the whole experience – my friends, the lectures, even the assignments and studying. I would sit at the computer wondering what to do!

### **Once a Student always a Student**

During my first year, my Economics lecturer and the director of the Gozo Centre, Professor Lino Briguglio, had said to me that once I started studying I would always be eager for more and would find it difficult to stop. And he was so right! When the Gozo Centre offered a Masters of Arts Degree in Islands and Small States Studies, I jumped at the chance and went in head-first. Many of my fellow students had also caught the bug and we once again found ourselves going through another three hectic but wonderful years together.

### **Multiple Graduation**

Initially I never expected to go the whole length. I imagined it would be too much and I almost gave up after Jamie was born. However since then I have graduated twice. Something I never expected to do even once! In 2003 I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Sociology and again in 2006 I graduated with a Master of Arts degree in Islands and Small States Studies. I never felt prouder than at that moment when I walked up the aisle of the Jesuit Church in the Old University Building in Valletta to receive my certificate, with my family watching, including my two boys who both wanted to be present.

### **Gratitude and Appreciation**

Gozo has various limitations due to its small size, and higher education opportunities are not easy to come by – the Gozo Centre has lifted many obstacles which stood in the way of so many people just like myself who, with so many other obligations, would not have dreamt of travelling backwards and forwards to Malta to further their studies, no matter how tempting the end result was.

I have a lot of people to thank for that. First and foremost the director of the Gozo Centre, Professor Lino Briguglio who, through an unimaginable amount of work and sacrifices, made a success of the Gozo Centre thereby opening the door for so many Gozitans to obtain a tertiary education, and in doing so changed a dream into a reality. I am also very grateful to the many lecturers who had to travel frequently from Malta to Gozo, even in bad weather. They always gave us the best they had to offer. The administrators of the Gozo Centre, Mr Joseph Calleja and Mr Marvin Grech, so efficient and helpful in all aspects, have done, and continue to do, such a wonderful job in the running of the centre. I am particularly grateful for the support I received from my family who had to put up with the lousy housekeeping, baked beans on toast on a good day and arguing over whose turn it was on the computer.

And finally thanks are due to my fellow students, the friends I made during our eight year journey together.

Caroline Camilleri Rolls obtained her degree in MA Islands and Small States Studies at the University of Malta Gozo Centre.