

Honoring a mother's dream

Commencement bittersweet for UW-Parkside graduate

BY MICHAEL BURKE
Journal Times

SOMERS — For Michael Owens, getting his University of Wisconsin-Parkside diploma on Mother's Day was appropriate, as he had returned to college at his mother's urging.

For Owens, the only thing missing Sunday afternoon at the Parkside spring commencement ceremony was his mother. She had died the summer he went back to school, in 2003.

"The difficult thing is it's on Mother's Day, which is going to be tough," the 42-year-old Owens said a couple of days before Sunday's ceremony. "It would have been beautiful if she could have been here."

Owens, now a Somers resident, grew up in Milwaukee and attended private schools through high school. That was a far cry from his father's third-grade education. "He had a

► More on **GRADUATE**, Page 11A



NATHAN PIER For The Journal Times

Michael Owens, left, marches with fellow graduate Dave Koss, right, and other classmates as they make their way to commencement ceremonies Sunday afternoon at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Owens was urged by his mother to continue his education after he completed 12 years in the Navy.

GRADUATE / On to a master's

From Page 9A

very difficult life," Owens said. Owens started college but couldn't afford to continue, so he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1987.

He was trained as an engineer and stayed in the Navy almost 13 years, until 2000.

His last tour of duty, at Great Lakes Naval Base, brought him to northern Illinois and eventually a job as a production manager in the Gurnee area. However, when that job ended, his mother started to encourage him to complete a college degree.

"She wanted me to reach my full potential," he said. "... She thought I had a lot of things to offer and not a platform to do them with."

Meanwhile, Owens learned that his mother's cancer, which she had battled in 2001, had returned by 2003. "But she never told me," he said.

He went back to school at Parkside on the Veterans Reha-

ilitation Program. That paid his tuition, books and a small stipend, while his wife, a grade school teacher in Kenosha, earned the main paycheck.

"That's the reason I could afford to go back to school," Owens said.

He had always been interested in history and politics, so he earned a history degree — with honors. In particular, he said, "I am interested in a time period beginning with the New Deal, to the present era, the migration of blacks up north and their political inability to solve problems in that area."

Owens said he is also writing a book. He said, "It's a modern look at the failure in the black community in economics, lack of leadership and decline of the family."

He has secured a spot, as one of 10 students, at UW-Milwaukee for next year in the special DoIt Project, to pursue a master's degree of library and information science.

Asked Sunday how it felt to be a graduate, so long after he first started college, Owens replied, "Like a great accomplishment. It is a lot of relief, because this is

something I wanted to do many, many years ago. Having to detour into the Navy felt like maybe my opportunity was up."

"It's been a challenge," he said, "but nothing worth achieving is easy."

Commencement speaker

Sunday's keynote commencement address was given by Renato "Ron" Turano, who was born in Italy and came to the United States at the age of 15.

He is now president of Campagna-Turano Bakery, Knead Dough Baking Co., the Turano Pastry Shops, and the Arturo Coffee Co. He is also a voting member of the Italian Senate.

According to Parkside, Turano was instrumental to creating the active partnership between the Parkside and the University of Calabria in Italy.

Through his efforts, several Parkside students were able to spend the fall 2005 semester studying in Calabria. Many more student exchanges are expected between the two institutions.



Owens