SSCC Student Success Story: Amanda Echols

When Amanda Echols reached her senior year in high school she wasn’t motivated to continue her education. “It was just one of those things that was not on my mind. A lot of people get into 11th and 12th grade and they think, ‘What’s next?’ she says. “I wasn’t really there yet.” She started taking a few classes, attending Shelton State Community College because her boyfriend (now her husband) went there. But events conspired to change her viewpoint. When her two sisters died in a 2008 car crash, Amanda began to re-think her priorities. “I decided that I’m going to go back to school, and I’m going to finish what I started, and I’m going to finish it for them. I’m going to push myself,” she recalls.

She found that she loved Shelton State! The school’s size and commitment to providing students personal attention filled a need for her. “I really liked it there. It wasn’t too big for me,” she remembers. “It was kind of homey. All my classes were like that. The teachers were very good at talking to you and being there if you needed to talk, or needed help. I really did have a wonderful experience.” Always athletic, Amanda loved to teach others. She found her niche in Shelton’s Wellness Program. She would eventually graduate Magna Cum Laude with an Associate’s Degree and a Wellness Instructor Certificate before enrolling at the University of Alabama in the Kinesiology Program where she graduated with honors.

The entire Shelton State faculty was helpful and supportive, Amanda says. “They’ve all turned out to be almost good friends as well. I know I can contact them if I need something and they’ll still reach out to help. You don’t get that, too much.” That was especially true of those in the wellness area. “They were wonderful and got you excited about what you were doing. You pushed that much harder.” For example, she described Dr. Milady Murphy as being particularly helpful during her time at Shelton State and even now. “She has been a reference for me from then on. And she was one of those who will really put herself out there for you if the opportunity comes about. If you need a reference or you need her to talk you up or say something about you, she’ll be there. She’s willing to help and go over and beyond to help you and that’s one of the things that I absolutely adore about her.” Other Shelton State instructors also made lasting impressions, she notes, including Kevin Burns, a psychologist who had provided assistance for the families of those killed on September 11, 2001. “I really was inspired by Mr. Burns and his stories,” Amanda says. “It was very moving.” She was so touched that she became more involved with psychology, eventually becoming part of the national honor society for two-year college students in psychology.
Currently, Amanda is a graduate assistant in kinesiology at The University of Alabama working on her master’s degree. An experienced researcher, she has won awards, and also given professional presentations at the state conference for physical education. She credits Shelton State for making all of that possible. First, she says, the opportunities she had to speak publicly at Shelton prepared her for making presentations before large and knowledgeable audiences. “I was given that platform starting out at Shelton. Being in the wellness program, you have to get in front of others, you have to teach. It just gave me that confidence... which is something I didn’t have before I went to Shelton.”

Shelton State’s instructors encouraged her natural inclination to stretch her limits, to achieve more. “They were very good at allowing me to do what I could do,” she says. Shelton “gave me that outlook of ‘You want to do more? OK. That’s fine.’” And Amanda would not have gone to Alabama at all, and certainly not to graduate school if not for the foundation she got from Shelton. “It kind of snowballed. I’m doing more with my life than I ever thought possible,” she said.

Now the question of what looms next for Amanda. She’s happy not to know the exact answer to that question. “I can honestly say I don’t know. But I’m looking forward to where it’s going to take me. Today, the opportunities are wide open for Amanda. She’s never quick to close the door on any of her future options. “It’s saying yes and taking those steps into places where I never thought I would go that have brought me to where I am. So, I almost never want to say ‘no,’ because I never know where it’s going to take me to next. I never know what kind of opportunity it’s going to lead to.” When people ask if she wants to teach, she says she’s considering it. When they ask if she’s going for her doctorate, she’s thinking it over. But one thing she’s sure of is that all these options started at Shelton State. “I didn’t think college was for me,” Amanda says. “Going to Shelton State proved to me that it was.”