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This wasn't Melissa Allison's first try at college. It wasn't her second.

And as she neared her 50th birthday — with four children at home and a bevy of personal challenges to overcome — Allison wasn't certain she'd make it to graduation on her third try, either.

But when Allison enrolled in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Utah State University, she found herself doing things she'd never imagined possible. And with every passing day, she became more comfortable — and more confident — that she would finally reach her long-held goal.

On May 7, Allison will receive a bachelor's degree in journalism at Utah State University's 129th Commencement — and she will be the first student at Utah State to graduate with the title of Media Scholar.

Created in 2015 to promote student engagement, strengthen professional development, and to encourage the broadening and deepening of knowledge and practice through courses across the university's curriculum, the Media Scholars program is offered to any student in the department or its affiliated programs. Students earn points toward the scholar designation through a variety of curricular and extracurricular accomplishments.

"It's definitely a recognition for above-and-beyond students," said Matthew LaPlante, an assistant professor of journalism who helps administer the program. "To become a Media Scholar takes extra time and effort, and a lot of purposeful thought about how to get the very most out of one's education. Melissa earned this designation even as she faced so many challenges in her life that, I

think it's fair to say, most of our students would find it hard to imagine. That says something special about her."

Allison worked toward her goal of becoming a Media Scholar with a travel abroad trip to Switzerland, by serving as a public relations team leader in a day-long community crisis simulation, and by interning at Utah Public Radio, where she "covered everything from the Thanksgiving turkey hotline to child sex trafficking in Colombia." She earned additional points by taking recommended, but not required, classes in subjects ranging from acting to first aid, and by serving as the host of a public affairs radio show dedicated to non-traditional students like herself.

Allison said she felt such students could use some additional support. It's not easy, she noted, "to connect with peers who are young enough to be my kids."

"On the first day of class they'd think I was the professor," she said. "They'd smile and make eye contact with me — and then the real professor would walk into the room."

After that, she said, she often felt ignored.

Allison said she had to work hard not to come across as motherly or as though she expected to be treated differently because of her age.

"I really tried to convey that I'm open, that I can learn as much from them and, hopefully, I can share something from my experiences as well," she said. "But that was a hard place to get to for me — it took me two years to feel like I was communicating that in the right way."

Now in the process of trying to find a job, Allison knows she has additional obstacles to overcome. A study published in the fall by researchers at the University of California at Irvine and Tulane University demonstrated, for instance, that age discrimination is rampant and particularly bad for women. Meanwhile, a video featuring ESPN's Sarah Spain and Chicago radio anchor Julie DiCaro, which went viral on Tuesday, demonstrated the vile harassment and threats female journalists sometimes face by anonymous misogynists on social media.

But Allison said she's not afraid of what is to come as she embarks on her new goal of earning a job at a public radio station.

"I've learned," she said, "that success is all a matter of grit."

Her children are learning that, too. Feeling a bit down on Tuesday by the fact that her hunt for a job has thus far

been unsuccessful, Allison said, she confided in her teen-aged daughter.

“And she took my face in her hands,” Allison said, “and she looked at me and said, ‘Mom, you can do anything you set your mind to. You’ve proven that.’ For her to say that to me — it just seemed like a reflection of everything.”

That evening Allison learned she was the first student to earn the Media Scholars title — and she said she couldn’t wait to tell her kids.