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UW-P grad aims to give back, bring change

Sakara Wages earns her bachelor's degree after a long road, looks to future.

BY ALLIE HINGA
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PLATTEVILLE, Wis. — Sakara Wages moved to Platteville in August 2012 with one duffel bag and a determination to make a better life for herself.

Nearly five years later, she has earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and has her sights set on her next destination: a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"I want to be the person who gives back," Wages said. "I want to be the change that we need to see."

Wages, 30, was one of 1,260 candidates for graduation honored during UW-P's 198th commencement ceremonies held Friday and Saturday on campus.

Wages' journey to graduation has been a long one. She graduated from high school in Chicago in 2004 and then enrolled at Western Illinois University. However, she left school when the financial burden at the time proved to be too great.

Wages found work over the years at various places. But she eventual-



JESSICA REILLY • *Telegraph Herald*

Sakara Wages tutors students Thursday at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology. **Related video: TelegraphHerald.com**

ly realized moving from job to job wasn't working, especially with the high cost of living in Chicago.

So Wages moved to Platteville. She stayed in a shelter at first, working three jobs so she could put down a security deposit on an apartment.

Wages spent two years working to pay off her debt from her earlier time in college, and then she set her sights on getting into UW-P. She eventually was admitted through an appeals process in fall 2014.

Around that time, Wages' young-

er brother Jordan made the decision to move to Platteville. He lived with Wages, who took on the roles of parent and sister for her younger brother.

At times, Wages found it difficult to balance work, school and home obligations — she worked on campus as a tutor and peer-assisted learning leader — but she sought to view that time in her life as an opportunity.

"It was that cognitive re-framing," Wages said. "These are events,

198th University of Wisconsin-Platteville Commencement

Where: Williams Fieldhouse at UW-P

Candidates for graduation: 1,103 undergraduate students, 157 graduate students

Principal speakers:

Rob Cramer, vice president of administration for the University of Wisconsin System; Ann Mayer, a UW-P graduate who has made contributions to the field of health research; Cynthia Bachmann, vice president of Fixtures Engineering, Kitchen, and Bath Americas at the Kohler Company; Michelle Merkovich, Federal Bureau of Investigation

Student speakers:

Kassidy Kohout; Emily Hefty; Emma Cleveland; Josiah Stewart

and that's the fact. But I can look at them as negative things, or I can look at them as opportunities, and that absolutely spurred my forward motion."

At the encouragement of her professors, Wages began applying to doctoral programs and eventually was accepted into the social

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welfare program at UW-Madison's School of Social Work.

"The most vulnerable people in our society need to be protected, and we as citizens must charge our government with doing so," Wages said. "I want to do that by way of research."

Elizabeth Gates, chair of UW-P's psychology department, served as her adviser and teacher. Wages is driven, resilient and takes advantage of any opportunity given to her, Gates said.

"She is absolutely one of my favorite students that I will work with in my entire

career," Gates said. "There will never be another student like Sakara."

After Wages finishes her doctoral degree, she wants to seek a career in education. Her dream involves becoming a psychology professor, and she eventually would like to find a teaching job at UW-P.

Also on her list of goals is to open a transitional living program in southwest Wisconsin, which would serve young people "on the wrong path" by helping them get back on their feet and make the transition to adulthood.

"I've learned to set goals and, by any means necessary, achieve those goals," Wages said. "Even if it means asking for help."