STCC turned passion to career

Elizabeth Loios, of Chicopee, says she wanted to turn her passion to create art into a career.
"I've been an artist all my life," Loios said. "I thought the best career path was in graphic design."
Ashleigh Ayers, of East Longmeadow, also loves art for as long as she can remember.
"I've been drawing since forever," she said. "In middle school I started working with graphic design and websites."
They both found the perfect program at Springfield Technical Community College. They enrolled in the graphic communications and photography program, which includes several options allowing students to zero in on their area of interest. Loios and Ayers proved academically. The women graduated with high honors and found full-time jobs.
College President John B. Cook said, "We love hearing that our graduates have found rewarding careers. One of our goals is to align our academic programs with the needs of area employers. We're confident that our students will find the right career path for them."
Liz now produces most social media posts on her own with occasional help from a senior specialist. She performs all of the graphic design and copywriting for a local restaurant.
"It's a great company," Loios said. "I've never been with a job that you really love."
Liz credits STCC's program with helping her land her dream job. "I definitely wouldn't have gotten that job without my degree," she said.
Loios didn't start college straight out of high school. She had spent a year working at 2180 before enrolling at STCC. But she said her interest in graphic design grew back to her teen years. When she was in high school, she liked to paint and create murals. But she didn't think she was ready for college.
"I felt like I wanted to do it when I was older," she said. "I probably would do a little better," said Loios, who graduated from STCC with a 17 percent average.

Elizabeth Loios, a graduate of the graphic communications and photography program at STCC, stands in one of the program's classrooms.

The program inspired her to do her best. "All the professors are really nice. You can go to them with anything." she said. "I liked that a lot of the classes are project based, and you do hands-on work."
Ayers, who earned straight As and graduated with a degree in graphic arts technology in 2016, also praised the instructors when asked what she liked best about the program. Before she applied at STCC, she spent one semester in another college's graphic arts program, which she didn't like.
"When I came to STCC, I thought the professors were great. They actually cared about what you were doing. They checked in with your work," she said.
The professors have industry experience and connections, which is appealing to students who need to get a foot in the door, she noted. One of her instructors, adjunct professor Christopher Zarbiero, is a graphic designer in a full-time job.
"Having professors with actual experience in the business is a big selling point," she said.
With help from Zarbiero, Ayers was hired as an intern at Envision Marketing Group in East Longmeadow. The company offered her a full-time web developer position in November.
"Having an internship first makes it a lot easier to find an actual job because of the connections you can make," Ayers said. "A good internship makes a big difference in how your career ends up."
At Envision, Ayers designs websites for a wide range of companies. She chooses colors, fonts and photos, among other responsibilities, and said she applies the core principles she learned at STCC.
Envision Marketing Group President Dan Bortolotto said college programs like graphic communications and photography help produce quality job candidates.
"It can be tough to find qualified web designers," he said. "Ashleigh is one of the most qualified people I've seen coming out of school. She's been great. We're really happy with her."
STCC helped create a career pathway for both Ayers and Loios. Professor Matthew Keefhas, department chair, said a degree in graphic communications and photography opens doors for creative students seeking careers in printing, publishing, advertising and commercial photography.
"If you want to be creative and learn hands-on," he said, "graphic communications and photography is the field to explore."
Interested in enrolling in the graphic communications and photography program? Visit the college website, stcc.edu/apply, or call the Admissions Department at 413-785-3333 for more information.