

PARKLAND COLLEGE GRADUATION

Perfect vision

Blindness won't stop Susan Coulter from achieving her dream of a degree in graphic design

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CHAMPAIGN — If you're looking to hire a graphic artist, fresh graduate Susan Coulter is looking for work.

Coulter is an A student in Parkland College's graphic-design program. She graduates Thursday.

"Susan is an A student because she treats her assignments seriously," says Paul Young, the Parkland professor who heads the program. "She never misses any deadlines, always follows the instructions, pays attention to the details and gives wonderful feedback during critiques. What she has that some of my other students don't have is intelligence. She's a problem solver, communicates well and strives to do her very best in terms of coming up with creative solutions."

Don't let the fact that she is legally blind bother you.

It doesn't bother her.

"It's an inconvenience, a pain in the neck," says Coulter, 50, of Champaign.

Several years ago, her sight started getting bad. She knew this might be coming; she shares a genetic problem with her mother and grandmother.

Her vision is now mostly peripheral. She can get around, but mourns the loss of her driver's license.

A neighbor and friend, Kai en Slaughter, squires Coulter about sometimes.

"She helps me out, too, Slaughter said. "She's the go to whenever I have a computer problem."

Coulter grew up all over the place before her military dad settled down in Rantoul.

She did one year of college at Ball State University, but she wasn't ready for it, so she dropped out and worked at a variety of jobs.

When downsizing hit at her last employer, she knew she had to make a major life adjustment.

"It's one thing to be losing your sight when you're employed, and something else when you're looking for a



John Dixon/The News-Gazette

Susan Coulter, who is legally blind, sits in front of a computer monitor displaying her graphic-design website while wearing her cap and gown Monday in the graphic-design Mac lab at Parkland College in Champaign. Coulter graduates Thursday night.

job," she says.

Art was the last thing she could think of.

"I didn't think I was artistic," she says. "I couldn't draw a straight line without a ruler."

While she was trying out majors, she considered a Web career, and her major then required a graphic-design course.

"I knew that this was it," she said.

At the same time, her daughter Whitney was graduating from high school. Of all things, she picked graphic design at Parkland, so they've taken classes together. (She also has a son, Drew, who farms in Paxton.)

"It is actually a lot of fun to have classes with my mom. Her strengths are my weaknesses and vice versa, and we always run our work by each other and critique each other's work," Whitney Coulter says.

Susan Coulter says she works almost exclusively on her computer, an Apple laptop.

She could do commercials

for the company.

"Apple has worked really hard to have the best accessibility features around," she says, adding that she has tried other tools but uses what came with her Mac.

"She is a wiz on the computer," says Young, the professor. "In fact, I would have to say that without the aid of digital technology, she might not have done as well in my classes."

Because she didn't want to be measured by her challenge, Young says, "I never slowed down for her, never gave her any extra help that I wouldn't give other students, and graded her as if she had perfect vision."

Minor problems with things like misalignment, he says, could be corrected in any round of the process, as happens in the real world.

Her finished work is impressive: you can view examples at susancoulterdesign.com.

But be warned: If you check out her Godiva ad, you're going to need a chocolate fix right away.

"It's one thing to be losing your sight when you're employed, and something else when you're looking for a job."

SUSAN COULTER
 soon-to-be Parkland College graduate