UAlbany Weekend MBA Stories – Denise Zieske
Business Partnership Coordinator, Tech Valley High School

How many of us dream large enough to believe we can really affect change for the future? Many talk the talk but it takes a unique, passion-filled individual to make something happen. Fueled by purpose and drive, Denise Zieske is one of those people. Accompanied by her robust determination, Denise is helping change the course of education, creating a better, more hopeful future for our children.

A native of Averill Park, New York, Denise Zieske has a knack for economic development and nurturing business relationships. Currently the business partnership coordinator for the non-traditional Tech Valley High School in Rensselaer, Denise’s days are filled with establishing long-term relationships with business and community partners to bring real world connectivity to students.

“Tech Valley High School is a regional public high school that features a project-based learning environment for students from 39 different school districts,” explains Denise. “Traditional high schools are geared toward teaching to the test. At Tech Valley, we teach to the reason why students need to learn things. That is where my passion lies. That is why I am here.”

Class projects are co-designed, co-taught, and co-assessed by the business partners Denise works so hard to establish and maintain. Students are taught how to work in teams and are graded on things like collaboration, self-direction, and presentation skills.

A “for instance” of Tech Valley High School’s project-based learning is the partnership with Ecovative, an environmental stewardship company that works to replace unsustainable plastics, foams, and other harmful materials with natural composites. “One of our seniors who worked side-by-side with the Ecovative team last January was hired by Ecovative during the summer and continues to work part-time during the school year,” expounds Denise. “It’s a win-win for the company, the school, and best of all – our community.”

Sense of accomplishment is nothing new to Denise. Her all-time peak career moment (so far) comes from the critical role she played creating and implementing the outreach and marketing program which ultimately resulted in the $4.2 billion semiconductor company, GlobalFoundries (AMD), building a campus in Malta, New York.

“Seeing my hard work pay-off like that is huge,” she notes with humble pride. “I was one of the first people to spend time in the California offices of the decision makers who ultimately decided to build the Luther Forest Technology Campus in Malta.”

In fact, Denise spent countless hours in the air en route to and from the West Coast and Europe. “That’s when I decided to pursue my MBA,” she shares. “Which worked out perfectly because I did A LOT of homework on the plane.”
Succeeding in her goal to earn her MBA before having children, Denise selected the UAlbany Weekend MBA Program because it was challenging, diverse, and offered a sense of community.

“Everyone in my class was a working professional. And though we were from varying backgrounds, each of us wanted to improve our own role in the work force and better understand the business side of our individual industries.”

Her advice to those considering pursuit of an MBA from UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program? “In order to get the most out of your MBA educational experience, I suggest you first gain a couple years of experience as a working professional,” she encourages. “As a business professional, not only will you be able to pull on real world experiences, but what you glean from others will be relatable back to your office.”

Gone are the days when Denise could pour herself into a book for hours and she and husband John fancied themselves scuba divers. “But with two children, life is never boring,” she assures. Set to celebrate 20 years of marriage on May Day in 2013, Denise and John now enjoy a life filled with swimming, karate, and a steady flow of books on tape.

Nine-year-old daughter Renee is active on her swim team and when she trains, Denise swims laps in the other end of the pool. Renee and her seven-year old brother Derek also stay busy learning the art of karate.

How does Denise Zieske balance life? For starters, there’s no television set in the Zieske home (pronounced ZEE ski). “We found we don’t need one,” Denise explains. “When we moved into our house, the cable wasn’t hooked up so there was nothing to watch.” Plus, John is a computer tech. “With six computers in the house, we’re well connected and informed. It didn’t take long to realize the TV wasn’t missed.”

The acting buff, once immersed in community dinner theater, has decidedly morphed into “Mom”. Now an ardent volunteer leader with the local Girl Scout troop and PTA, Denise notes, “We love to ski as a family,” pausing to clarify, “Well, I ski. Everyone else in the family snowboards.”

Fulfilling her goal to simply enjoy life, Denise has also set a new standard of value for providing meaningful, project-based learning experiences for high school students.

“If we are successful in our endeavors, we will indeed change the course of education,” she says with candor. “Creating a better workforce for tomorrow means equipping students to be ready and able to change the way business is done. That is our hope for the future.”

Connect with Denise Zieske here:
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In The News: [http://www.bizjournals.com/albany/search?q=%22Denise+Zieske%22](http://www.bizjournals.com/albany/search?q=%22Denise+Zieske%22)

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