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## Tiger honored with state award

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It's a long journey from a childhood in Poland to reaching your goal of becoming a doctor in the United States. But steadfast dedication earned a Franklin woman a state award presented to someone who has achieved a significant level of self-sufficiency and independence through the assistance of a Community Action Program.

Macon Program for Progress nominated Gosia Tiger for the Lonnie D. Burton Achievement Award. The award focuses on the nominee's progress and achievements, including the circumstances that caused the nominee to seek assistance, their commitment to achieving personal goals, additional responsibilities while working toward those goals and the person's contributions to the community.

Tiger said she was speechless when she learned she had been chosen for the award. "There are more amazing people than me. I was really humbled that I received the award."

But those who know Tiger, think she is very deserving of the award, which was presented May 12 at the N.C. Community Action Association's annual conference in Cherokee.

"Macon Program for Progress was very eager to nominate Gosia for this award and overjoyed that she won. It is recognition that she richly deserves," said MPP Executive Director Chuck Sutton. "She had an unwavering commitment to meet her goals and worked long and hard to see her dreams realized."

Sutton said the agency assists dozens and dozens of families and individuals each year to achieve goals and better their lives through its various programs. "All of them should be celebrated for their accomplishments," he said. "What set Gosia apart was her drive and persistence to go absolutely as far as her abilities would carry her. Now as a family nurse practitioner, she will fill a much-needed role in our rural community providing care and serving others." Tiger participated in four MPP programs from 2012-2018.

### The journey from Poland

Tiger was born and raised in Poland. "My childhood was probably different than most people can imagine." She describes life as "kind of grey" and says she grew up without electricity and remembers carrying water from the river.

"We didn't really have access to many things," she said. While looking at catalogs she got from the garbage, she saw all the things that were available in other places. "I could not imagine that not that far away there was a world that had all that, because we didn't."

She also remembers the historic moment when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. "We gained some freedom at least," she said. "We could travel a little bit."

In 1998 after a trip to Germany when she was 19, she came home and told her parents she was leaving to see the world.

She enrolled in a university and earned a Bachelor of Applied Science in political science and government in 2003 and while studying in Berlin she earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 2004.

She is fluent in four languages – Polish, German, Russian and English – which led her to doing translation work for the commerce department at the embassy.

Tiger came to the United States in 2004 and



Gosia Tiger and Bryan Duncan, who presented Tiger with the Lonnie B. Burton Achievement award.

spent her first four years here living in Florida. While doing translation work for Native Americans, she met a woman from Cherokee who would become a good friend and encouraged her to move to North Carolina. She has been in Western North Carolina since 2008. "It is so beautiful here," she said.

Shortly after her daughter, Jada, was born on July 4, 2010, she went home to Poland to be with family. While there she received her letter for U.S. citizenship. Tiger returned to Franklin and began working in IT support at Angel Medical Center in December 2010.

Tiger first learned of the services MPP offered when the organization was able to secure housing for Tiger and her infant daughter through the HUD Section 8 Rental Assistance Program.

Then, when Tiger decided she wanted to go back to school, she received help through the Self-Sufficiency program which offers assistance with school supplies and gas money for driving to school.

"That was always nice," Tiger said. "These are the little things, but little things aren't so easy when you don't have much money."

After working about a year and a half at Angel, Tiger, with some encouragement from others, decided to go back to school. She said people had commented that she worked well with the patients and had a very calming way with them, and one person told her it was a sign from God that she should be a nurse. Tiger said she wasn't so sure at first, but after she thought about it, she decided that might be the next step for her. "I like giving of myself and doing something nice for others."

After earning her CNA, Tiger enrolled in the RN program at Southwestern Community College. She said she chose SCC because she knew it was "working-people friendly." MPP's Community Services Block Grant and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act provided assistance that allowed her to continue her education.

"I don't have family or relatives here. I had very few friends at that time, and being a single mom, I didn't really have the support. I knew I had to work all the time," she said. Some evenings she would take Jada to class with her. She also remembers days when she would get up at 4 a.m., wrap Jada in a blanket and drop her off at a friend's house who would then take her to Head Start.

At the same time, she was going to SCC, Tiger was also taking classes at Western Carolina University. She earned her RN degree from SCC in 2016 and completed a Bachelor of Science

in nursing and a minor in math from WCU in 2017, graduating summa cum laude.

"I am proud of the summa cum laude because I had the 4.0 GPA, and I don't know how I did it," Tiger said. But her education didn't stop there as she continued working toward her goal of being a doctor. "So, let's go all the way, because I knew if I ever stopped, I would never go back."

In July 2021 she completed her Doctor of Family Nursing-Family Nurse Practitioner degree through East Carolina University.

She said her supervisors at Angel supported her and adjusted her work schedule so she could attend classes. "They were wonderful," she said. But as she neared the end of her course work, she felt she wasn't giving 100% at work, so she took some time off to complete her clinicals. After she earned her degree, the hospital rehired her as a nurse. She continued working with Angel until March 2021. She currently works as a nurse at the Veterans Affairs clinic in Franklin, but later this year will be starting a new job with Appalachian Mountain Community Health based in Asheville and providing health care to under-served areas of WNC.

She likes the organization's mission and said it matches her long-term vision to be able to help people who can't afford medical care or don't have health insurance.

"I had a vision one time when I became a nurse. I had a dream that one day I would become a doctor and I would have my own practice. And the vision I had was that in my practice when a patient comes, they could find as much as possible in one place," she said. "When I read the mission statement of this organization, it just matched the vision, the dream I always had."

Tiger said her life was hectic while she was going to school and working. She admits she probably was not a good friend during that time, missing out on birthday parties, dinners and other special occasions.

She said she would often get overwhelmed if she looked at the whole semester ahead of her, so she learned just to take life a week at a time. "You just know you have to do it and you just do it."

Tiger said she is proud of her daughter and appreciates that she never complained when she was gone long hours, had to work holidays or missed out on her activities. Jada started with MPP's Head Start when she was about a year old and continued until it was time to start school. "They were wonderful. Jada was so well prepared for school," Tiger said.

Now at age 11, Jada attends Rabun Gap Nacoochee School. "I'm very proud of my mom because she did this all by herself and she always pushed me to do better too and has had a big influence on my life and what I want to be when I get older. I am very happy to see how far she has come."

Tiger has served on the Macon Program for Progress board of directors, the Macon County Board of Health, and volunteers with other community organizations. And now that her life has slowed down a bit, she hopes to do more.

"I want to give back to the community for all their support, and people in general are always so nice and believing in me," she said.

