seven family members, one alma mater

When Susan Johnson, Ph.D., RN (B.S. '81/N; M.S. '82/N; Ph.D. '10/N), clinical assistant professor in the School of Nursing, walks around the Virginia Commonwealth University campus, she often is transported back to her student days. Johnson arrived at VCU more than 40 years ago to study nursing. To this day, she says, certain places on campus, such as Hibbs Hall or West Hospital, trigger memories of when she was a new student finding her way.

“I loved having that feeling as a young person that knowledge was here — that something bigger than you was in this place — and I still get that feeling,” says Johnson, who earned bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees in nursing from VCU.

In fact, that sensation has strengthened with the passing of time and with the successive experiences of her children. Each of Johnson’s four daughters and two sons followed in her footsteps to VCU, and they all thrived as students, graduating with bachelor’s degrees: Carey (B.A. '00/H&S), Joseph (B.F.A. '02/A), Sarah (B.S. '03/H&S), Jacob (B.S. '08/LS), Mary Beth (B.S. '11/H&S) and Emily (B.S. '14/H&S).

Susan says she relished the opportunity to share the university with her children and to see it anew through their eyes and interests.

“One of the great things about having my children be part of the VCU community is how much I have learned as a parent about the diversity of what VCU has,” Susan says. “I’ve learned so much more about VCU through my children because they’ve followed their own pathways.”

The last of the Johnson graduates, Emily, took the least direct road to VCU. Emily opted to follow her interests in agriculture following high school, and she bypassed college to work on a farm. She later attended community college and earned her associate degree in biology. When she decided to pursue further studies in that field, she did not look far. She was aware VCU had a

One Johnson after another continues the VCU tradition

By Tom Gresham
strong biology program. Also, not insignificantly, she felt the pull of a burgeoning tradition.

“It was easy to pick VCU,” Emily says. “I wanted it to stay in the family. I wanted to continue that legacy.”

Susan insists her children’s gravitation toward VCU was never by design. She and her husband, Jerry, both thought highly of VCU and the education it offered, and they appreciated its proximity to home, but they were not dead set on each child choosing that route. For Johnson after Johnson, however, VCU proved to be the best option for reasons unique to that particular child.

“Every single one of them has had a very positive experience,” Susan says.

Carey was first.

“She started looking at different colleges, including some out of state, but she came back because she realized she wasn’t going to get a better education anywhere else,” Susan says.

Then came Joseph, a sculptor who was drawn to the university’s renowned School of the Arts.

“A lot of my teachers encouraged me to apply to VCU because of the arts program, and it was just an obvious choice,” Joseph says.

The momentum built from there. “Once the first two siblings went, I think that became an influence on the other kids, because they saw the good experiences they had, and they knew it was a good place to be,” Susan says.

Joseph says the variety and quality of the educational paths available at VCU help explain the reason the Johnsons kept selecting the university.

Carey majored in English, Joseph in sculpture, Sarah and Emily in biology, Jacob in environmental science, and Mary Beth in history and women’s studies.

“We’ve been all over the place at VCU, in all kinds of different disciplines, and I think it says a lot about what VCU has to offer that we could all study our own interests there,” Joseph says.

Susan says a common thread that has run through the college experiences of both her and her children is VCU’s diversity and commitment to the community. Education at VCU, she says, has aspirations beyond the individual. She has been proud to watch the ways all six of her children have applied their educations in the world after graduation.

“I think because of the urban campus, VCU teaches us this idea that you must be aware of the communities around us,” she says. “The university is not just about learning for the sake of learning but learning to bring our knowledge out into the world around us.”

Susan says she felt a particular sense of satisfaction and accomplishment when Emily graduated in December, completing the family line and prompting her to realize, “We did it.”

– Tom Gresham (M.F.A. ’15/H&S) is a contributing writer for the alumni magazine.