Determination, strength, resiliency: If you've ever had a string of bad luck or misfortune, you know that overcoming obstacles -- real obstacles -- requires quite a bit of all three.

By the age of 32, Shanda Cue exemplified such qualities, and then some. Not only did this single mom overcome breast cancer while earning her associate degree via online learning, she is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree and is thirsty for more.

"I want a hood," explains the recent paralegal studies graduate of Kaplan University. She's referring to the "hood" worn by postgraduate students at commencement.

It was during Kaplan's graduation ceremony in Chicago that Shanda first noticed this academic hood of prestige. What might be a fleeting observation for some provided Shanda with inspiration toward goals that include completing her bachelor's degree in May of 2007.

After all, setting sights on the future is nothing new for this survivor of the second-biggest killer of women. Shanda was 28 and just beginning her associate degree when diagnosed with metastatic cancer. That's when the devastation set in.

"My world was coming to an end," Shanda recalls. "It took me a few days to fall to the ground, but then I had to pick myself up again."

Although physically and emotionally weak, she was determined to fight.

"I had no choice," adds the mother of a 12-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son. As the sole provider for her two children, Shanda was determined to see them grow up.

When asked about the source of her strength, she replies, "I had the meanest mother on earth -- she taught me to keep on going. You have to forge on." Her mother's influence, along with her own resilient will and determination, has led Shanda to make the most of each and every day.
Still, those first cancer-battling days were tough. At the time of her diagnosis, Shanda worked in Trenton, N.J., at the Department of Justice, and was responsible for record management along with other office duties. Despite being out of work for several weeks, her co-workers became her support system, even bringing meals to her home.

"I have been blessed by them," she says. In between treatments, working and raising her children, she remained focused on the future, one that included -- even amidst her struggles -- a dedication to academic advancement.

In the back of her mind, Shanda was cognizant of potential opportunities arising at work, and she knew the only way to advance was to earn that coveted degree. After her kids were tucked into bed at night, she focused on her homework. She prioritized and ensured her studies did not falter, even with her dwindling health. "If that meant getting up early, that's what I did. There are 24 hours in each day. I made use of each one," she explains.

That fateful day soon came when Shanda was declared cancer-free and able to fully immerse herself in her studies, her work, and the responsibilities of being a single mother. She relocated to Georgia, where she continued working for the Department of Justice.

Until devastation struck yet again.

In 2004, the cancer returned. As with the first diagnosis, she allowed herself only a few days to be down before pushing herself forward with sheer willpower. Because she'd been through this before, she understood what a blessing it was to overcome the illness, and remained steadfastly positive.

While she's currently in treatment through December, this ambitious mom has vowed to not let her illness affect studies. In fact, less than five days after earning her associate degree, she began taking classes toward a bachelor's degree. While she looks forward to the future, Shanda plans to take time off next summer to enjoy being with her children. After that, she says, it's onto a master's degree.

Above all, this inspirational mom feels that she simply cannot let her son and daughter down.

"I believe in living as a role model for my kids. My daughter wants to go to Harvard, so I need to be an example to her [to show her] that no matter what, anything is possible.”