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Laurel Hicks has always had a curious mind and a desire to apply new ideas. It's what led her to a degree in mechanical engineering and a 12-year career in the automotive industry.

"I always have loved science, research and figuring out how things work," said Hicks.

While working long hours as an engineer, Hicks developed a passion for yoga and mindfulness, stemming from a desire to help others and an interest in alternative forms of health care. She began to integrate her new interests with her inclination toward research, eventually embarking on a new career: training prenatal yoga teachers and pursuing a dual title Ph.D. in clinical social work and infant mental health at Wayne State.

"I discovered that I could combine my research-oriented mind with my love of helping others," she said. "There's something very rewarding to me about furthering our knowledge of human behavior, development and health, and

Scholarships and fellowships open door to second career in health research... <http://pivotalmoments.wayne.edu/story/scholarships-and-fellowships-op...>
integrating it into practice.”

As a trainee in Wayne State’s Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute (MPSI), Hicks researches the effectiveness of mindfulness-based therapies, which incorporate Buddhist traditions of meditation and awareness with contemporary psychotherapy. She currently is working with pregnant women and parents with young children in Detroit to research the impact of this approach on stress reduction and well-being.

Carolyn Dayton, associate director of the Infant Mental Health Program at MPSI and assistant professor in the School of Social Work, notes that Hicks’ research fills a critical gap in prenatal care. “Pregnant and nursing mothers are often reticent to take psychotropic medications,” she said. “Therapies such as those Laurel is investigating may be a viable alternative.”

Pursuing a new career in a field far less lucrative than engineering presents significant economic challenges, but Hicks has sought out scholarships and other resources to help fund her education. She received the Graduate Professional Scholarship and the Thomas C. Rumble Fellowship from Wayne State’s Graduate School. Most recently, she received a Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan doctoral award, allowing her to dedicate more time to her current research.

“When I left my automotive job, my finances changed vastly, and I was very concerned about how I would afford graduate school,” she said. “The fellowships I received have definitely reduced my financial stress considerably.”

Without having to worry about finances, Hicks can focus on the impact of her work. “Research is such an important and meaningful way to better our world,” she said. “The research performed at Wayne State is truly pivotal in improving our community’s health.”

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