

Friday, May 12, 2006



Steve Perez / The Detroit News

Mario Tabone earned three degrees in six years.

Super grad: Law degree, MBA -- by 21!

UDM alum gives new meaning to 'quick study'

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

At age 2, Mario Tabone could distinguish between Bach and Vivaldi compositions. In junior high, he hauled a backpack that weighed just as much as he did. At 15, he became the youngest graduate ever of the academically rigorous University of Detroit Jesuit High School.

And on Saturday, Tabone will graduate with a law degree and his master's in business administration from the University of Detroit Mercy at the ripe age of 21.

"I don't think it has sunk in yet," said Tabone of Dearborn. "Once it amounts to (a job), I'll see what these six years have meant."

In six years, Tabone will have earned three degrees from UDM including his bachelor's -- a feat that typical students struggle to accomplish in nine years. But then again, Tabone has a history of accelerated learning.

He skipped several grades as a child. "I was just too bored with the material at hand," he said. "I



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Mario Tabone has spent hours since he arrived at UDM at 15 helping the Titans basketball squad with drills, coordinating game tape and traveling with the team. His dedication to the team lasted six years. ▶

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was happier to have more challenging problems to go over."

His parents, who own a cherry orchard in Petoskey and a vineyard in Traverse City, knew their oldest son was special when he could read at age 2. He absorbed everything like a sponge, even his parents' love for classical music, his father Mario Tabone said.

"He knew 30 or more composers," the elder Tabone said. "Vivaldi. Four Seasons," he would say. He knew the pieces."

What makes Tabone so successful is that he's not only a quick study, but also a very hard worker, an ethic he honed at a young age by spending hours picking fruit and pruning trees at his parents' orchard in the summer. By age 13, he was managing his family's fruit stands at markets.

"Maybe he is genetically a genius? I don't know," said Bahman Mirshab, dean of UDM's College of Business Administration. "But based on what I can say, it's his determination (that makes him succeed) and the fact that he is very serious about what he's doing."

Because of his humility, respect and drive, Tabone has been a role model for Mirshab's two kids, ages 10 and 12, he said.

"I'm hoping my children walk in his footsteps," Mirshab said. "I myself wish I had walked in his footsteps."

Academic muscle flexed early

By the time he was 9, Tabone needed more academic challenges. So he took the entrance exam for U. of D. Jesuit High School and Academy, which serves grades 7-12. He passed the test with ease and entered seventh grade.

During high school, he belonged to just about every club that was available. A lover of sports, the young Tabone managed the U. of D. Jesuit football team in ninth and 10th grades. That meant the 11-year-old was a gopher, helping the coaches arrange practices and set up equipment.

Because Tabone was so small compared to some of the 18-year-old burly players, his parents sometimes worried the coach would one day throw a jersey on Tabone so teammates could just toss the pre-teen for a first down.

"We were always concerned that at fourth and one, they might use him and throw him over the line," the elder Tabone mused.

After high school, Tabone chose UDM for college. His father is an alumnus and Tabone received full scholarships.

But he was only 15. A true Titan fan, Mario began helping out the UDM basketball team at 15. He spent hours passing balls at practice, running drills, coordinating game tape and traveling with the team.

His dedication to the team lasted six years. Coach Perry Watson watched him evolve from an awestruck and sometimes shy teen to a mature, humble and fun-loving adult, he said.

But at any age, the players respected Tabone, Watson said.

"Mario knows more about the program than they know," Watson said. "I bet a lot of players don't



The Rev. Gerard Stockhausen, president of UDM, with Tabone as Tabone receives his law degree. "Once it amounts to (a job), I'll see what these six years have meant," he says of his academic achievements. ▶ [See full image](#)

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know his age. ... They accepted him because he was confident and a guy who was able to be successful on and off the court."

Age disparity outgrown

Tabone doesn't look like a teen anymore. At 21, he blends in more easily with his business and law school classmates. But there were certainly moments when the age gap was apparent.

"At law school, the mentality was to go out to the bar after an exam or after class," Mario said. "I couldn't do that. ... But I didn't really feel I missed out that much."

For the first time in a while, Tabone may relax a bit before he takes the bar exam in February and starts the job hunt. But one activity won't change: he'll be picking cherries under the hot sun this summer.

He also hopes to visit his only sibling, brother Michael, 17, who just finished his freshman year at college in Florida.

Tabone's not quite sure where he'll end up eventually, but he's interested in doing marketing for a Fortune 500 company.

"I see Mario doing great things with his life," said Tabone's friend Dennis Morey, 23.

"I don't know exactly what. It will be interesting to see what road he takes."

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