

Great-grandmother earns bachelor's degree

BY SCOTT TRAVIS
SUN SENTINEL

FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida — Many students go back to school once they realize their job prospects are limited, but few are doing it in their 80s.

Yet that's the path charted by Betty Reilly, a great-grandmother who at 89 received a bachelor's degree in English from Florida Atlantic University on Thursday. "I'm gung ho on education, and I believe it's never too late," she said. "If I can do it, anybody can."

Reilly never finished high school as a teenager, but rarely thought about it until she was job searching at 78. She got turned down for a job at a library because she didn't have a high school diploma.

So she began an 11-year journey to earn her General Education Development diploma, an associate's degree and now a bachelor's degree.

Reilly didn't let a lack of money or a car stand in her way. She applied for federal Pell Grants, which cover most of the cost of tuition, fees and books. And for the past eight years she has traveled by bus from her Sunrise condo to the Davie campuses of both Broward College, where she earned an associate's degree, and FAU in Boca Raton.

Reilly's five children and other family members cheered her on from the audience.

"It's about time. It's been a long trek," said her daughter, Beth Reilly, 62. She said her mom's story has inspired her to consider going back to college once she retires.

Betty Reilly was born in 1926 in Youngstown, Ohio, but grew up in New York City during the Depression. She said she was a good student and even had a scholarship to attend the New School, a liberal arts college in New York.

But she said during her senior year in high school, she became violently ill with hepatitis A after eating raw clams at Times Square. Antibiotics weren't yet commonly prescribed, and the illness debilitated her for two months. She quit school and lost her scholarship. Once she recovered, she took a job doing clerical work, and later got married and started a family.



Betty Reilly

She moved to South Florida with her husband, Thomas, a financial consultant, in 1965. Over the years, she worked a number of retail jobs. She continued to work after her husband died in 1989. She was looking for a new job in 2005, when an employee at the West Regional Library in Plantation encouraged her to apply for an opening there. She then remembered she didn't have a high school diploma, which was a requirement.

She took the GED exam but didn't pass it.

"I aced English and reading and got one wrong in science and social studies, but I forgot my math," she said.

So she took a GED preparation course and passed the exam in 2007 at the age of 80.

Reilly began working as a volunteer tutor at a local high school. When a teacher suggested she go back to college, Reilly said she couldn't afford it since she lives on a fixed income.

"That's when they told me about the Pell Grant," she said. "I filled out the forms, went to the local community college and got accepted."

She started taking two to three classes each semester at Broward College, where her instructors told her she had a flair for writing. She earned her associate's degree in 2011 at age 85.

"Everyone was saying, 'You can relax. You have your degree,'" Reilly said. "But I said that's halfway. I wanted to finish my college degree."

Since she loved to read and write, she decided to pursue a degree in English at FAU.

Over the years, she has gotten some stares from her young classmates but over-

all, "they've been wonderful," she said.

"They're always giving me hugs. They're my greatest boosters," she said. "They don't patronize me because I'm an older student."

Reilly's not FAU's oldest graduate. That distinction goes to Mark A. Rickets, who was 91 when he received a bachelor's in computer science in 1992. And Menahem Hager graduated with a master's degree in 2011 at the age of 90.

Reilly has mixed emotions about graduating.

"I am so happy because of this milestone," she said. "But I'm also a little sad, too. I'd really like to go on and continue my education."



WHAT IS IT?



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Send your answers for this week's What Is It (above) to: Robert Croul, 1095 North Road, Newburgh, Maine 04444. Readers may respond by email to recastate@midmaine.com. Be sure to write "What is it?" in the subject line.



The Nov. 28 Bangor Daily News "What Is It?" was correctly identified as a pair of bull nose lead pliers by Erny Levesque, John Weeks, Arnold Berube, Donald Beckwith, Arthur Humphry, Percy Harding, Mike and Della Gleason, Vicki Stanley, Peter Edgecomb, Andrea Pelletier, James Wagner, Brenda Harrington, Charlie Goodell, Fred Monroe, Paul Emery, Danny Edwards, Bob Hawes, Bob White, Wanda Wright, Dick DeGraaf, Bridget McIntosh, Randy Jackson, Kermit McGary, Roy Marshall, Jim Madsen, Harold Wiggin, O.K. Blackstone, Jack Hennessey, Irvin Krupke, Sally Philbrick, Chuck Kennedy, Roslyn Reid, Rick Lauze, Sonny Colburn, Larry Michaud, Rex Kneeland, Doug Tibbetts, Ted Bromage and Jeff Orchard.



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