

Public Relations

News and Announcements

The 40-year bachelor's degree: Wayne State helps senior graduate

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On Dec. 12, Dorothy Mahlin will cross the stage in the Matthaei Physical Education Center and receive her bachelor's in communication studies from Wayne State University. Her family will applaud from the stands as she smiles for the photographer.

But this vivacious, 'A' student is no typical college coed. The 88-year-old Mahlin has been taking classes at Wayne State University since the early 1970s.

Many people helped Mahlin (pictured, left) cross the finish line, but two stand out: her daughter, Nancy, and the instructor of her final class, Amy Graham (pictured, right), a psychology predoctoral trainee at the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute.

"Mom needed just four credits to finish," Nancy said. "But after the first session of developmental psychology, she said she wasn't up to it and wanted to quit."

Nancy talked to her mother about the importance of finishing what a person starts, a credo from her childhood. Dorothy saw the wisdom and came back to class.

"That was a work of genius on Nancy's part," Dorothy said. "She never coerced. She just left it up to me. And Amy was so nice and helpful. I knew I would get through it."

After high school, college was an unattainable dream for Dorothy. "I loved to learn, but we were poor and couldn't afford college," she said. She found a job instead and, in her early 20s, married Murray Mahlin, a student in Wayne State's School of Medicine. As he launched his urology practice, Dorothy gave birth to four children and devoted herself to motherhood. She vowed to one day go to college, but not until the children were also in school.

"I couldn't leave them," Dorothy said. "They came first."

Her college career began with an English class at Wayne State's extension center in Oakland County – a class she said was a true struggle. "The first paper I wrote came back with so many red marks you could barely read it," she said. "But I was never discouraged. I listened and learned." The professor used her final paper as a benchmark of excellence for the other students.

Dorothy, a resident of Southfield, Michigan, completed most of her classes at Wayne State in the '70s before life pulled her in another direction — the stage. She wrote musical parodies, sang and danced, performing for many groups, including Hadassah (a Jewish women's volunteer group). "I loved it. It was fun," she said. "And I was good. One of the rabbis told me he couldn't stop laughing."

Everything changed two years ago, when Murray died after 65 years of marriage. In January, Dorothy lost her beloved sister. Dorothy's children Jeff, Catherin, Cindy and Nancy searched for ways to help their grieving mother re-engage. They thought it might be time for



her to finish her degree.

"I don't know how to fully express how wonderful my children have been. Those four are the best people in the whole world," Dorothy said. They each encouraged their mother, but Nancy — who lives near Dorothy and has a more flexible schedule — became the driving force.

From buying the textbook to setting deadlines and driving Dorothy to class, Nancy made it happen. "I even sat in on the first class. The material was fascinating," she said. "My degree is in psychology."

But Nancy's support and Dorothy's motivation might not have been enough without the special effort of Graham, her instructor, and her department supervisor, Rita Casey.

"Amy's enthusiasm was unmatched," Nancy wrote in a glowing letter to Boris Baltes, chair of the psychology department. "She is very professional, with a heart of gold and the gift of sensitivity. Amy bent over backward to help my mom in her class. She emailed me the slides for each class lecture so I could print and give them to my mom. She made it easy for me to help."

Dorothy is equally complimentary, saying Graham created an environment that was academically nurturing without being intimidating. Teaching is an art, and Dorothy said Graham's artistry shines in her commitment to her profession and her students, and her ability to teach with grace, honesty, enthusiasm and friendliness. "She made me feel good to be in the class," Dorothy said, adding that Graham gave her students the courage to believe in themselves.

Graham said the class was lucky to have Dorothy, who actually lived through the developmental stages being taught. Graham said students enjoyed her perspective and learned from her. In one discussion, Dorothy's life experiences confirmed core parenting concepts that remain valid today.

"Dorothy and her siblings grew up very poor. Her father died when she was young, and she credits her mom with keeping the family going," Graham said. "Her mom understood instinctively what was important. She gave the children her undivided attention, kept them clean and fed, with a roof over their heads and a regular bedtime. She taught them to take school seriously."

Research now shows that concentrating on these priorities helps combat the stresses and risks to children that poverty often triggers. With graduation around the corner, Dorothy, her family and Graham said they are more than ready to witness the long-awaited pivotal moment.

"Amy is as excited for my mom's graduation as we are," Nancy said. "This is the most important thing I've ever done for my mom or with my mom. It has been a very intimate experience to help her through this milestone. I'm so glad Wayne State gave us the chance."

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