

# Back to School



BY THELMA FAYLE

**M**om and I played scrabble on a picnic table near the university. She looked at the nearby students and said she thought they were lucky to get a good education. When I suggested she take a university course, she looked at me as though I were daft. “I wouldn’t qualify to get in,” she said.

Mom had to leave school in Grade 6 when her mother died. Her step-father insisted she stay home and take care of her younger siblings. As a result, she has always been embarrassed about her lack of formal education.

I told her she could easily get in as a mature student, and with her attitude toward learning, she would likely have a ball.

“The main reason I would like to take the University 101 course is to prove to myself that I could do it,” she explained in her application to UVic. “My lack of education has always been a thorn in my side,” she added.

Before we dropped off her application, I sat her down for a heart-to-heart chat. I told her that as much as I wanted her to take this course, because I knew she could do it, I needed to know that she was motivated by her desire – not just mine.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” she said, “last night when I got into bed, I was imagining myself as the class valedictorian. I kind of wrote a speech in my head,” she confided. That was all I needed to hear. We had a good laugh together.

After a hiatus of 75 years, Thelma Fayle Sr., mother of six, grandmother of 13 and great-grandmother, entered a university for the first time in her life, in her 88th year.

Our mother-daughter roles reversed, and it was my turn to take my mother to school.

“I hope I don’t have to memorize things,” she said on our way to class that first night; “my memory isn’t so good anymore.” She nervously wondered aloud if she would have her own desk like she

did in Grade 6.

I tried to sit and read while I waited, but couldn’t concentrate. Instead, I paced the halls anxiously for three hours and even tried to discreetly peek in the classroom window to see if Mom looked comfortable. I was relieved when she finally came out of class waving her new ID card. “I am a university student,” she beamed.

“I am going to have to look up some words in the dictionary,” she announced; “like ‘social sciences’. I don’t even know what some of these things are. I am going to have to concentrate. We talked about Aristotle. There is so much to think about. I certainly don’t want to be a failure at university.”

I enjoyed the barrage of excitement that tumbled out and tried to assure her that she would not fail.

Twice a week, class started with a meal in the cafeteria, followed by a lecture from a different professor every week. The class of 30 students wrapped up in small discussion groups to share impressions.

When I picked up Mom after her class one night, she was walking down the hallway and chatting with a young woman in her 20s. Judging by the warm round of waves and smiles from other students, school life was off to a good start.

“Tonight I had dinner with a student from Japan,” she told me. “I said ‘Konichiwa’ to her and she had a big smile on her face. I think she appreciated that I could say something to her.”

“How do you feel in class?” I asked. “It feels neat. We are all learning a lot from each other,” she responded. “How is your hearing?” I asked. “Not great; so I sit close to the teacher.”

“I am figuring out I have a certain way of learning,” she said. “In general, I like working from a pattern. I have to see something and work it out in my head, and then understand it. I didn’t know that about myself.”

Her usual smile changed to some small terror after another class.

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"I have to write a paper about the 'Artifice of Being Human,'" she said. "Well you have more life experience than anyone in class, so I am sure you will do well with it," I suggested.

Mom's world kept expanding. In class, she learned about Karl Marx, Aristotle, critical thinking, archeology and economics. Every class was an adventure that gave her new things to think about.

Mom has always had a distinct people-focus. Every week she noted intuitive responses to classmates:

"Denise's father is sick. She is under a lot of pressure."

"Don is trying to quit smoking. I hope he can do it."

When the cafeteria cook was away one week, she made a point of finding out his name, and telling Douglas when he returned, "I missed you last week."

"It seems the more we learn about other people, the better off we are," Mom concluded.

"Taking this course makes me realize how much I have missed," Mom said more than once. I countered, the beginning of wisdom for all of us is in realizing how much we have to learn.

Each student was invited to bring two guests to the formal completion ceremony. With 17 family members in town, that was a problem for Mom. But not for Becky Cory, the University 101 project coordinator, who kindly considered the circumstances and was determined to accommodate Mom's whole family.

Mom was one of two students to give a speech that night. Leaning on her cane, with her tiny frame barely visible from behind the podium, she said, "My dream now is to complete University 102 before I turn 90." With that feisty ending, Mom received her first standing ovation from the audience of 300.

She had completed a university course.

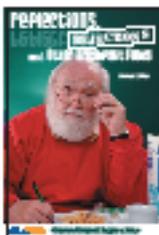
University 101 offered Mom an unexpected, late-life sense of satisfaction where there had been a 75-year-long feeling of embarrassment for having had to drop out of school.

Today, she has three framed certificates on her bedroom wall – to remind her of the time she spent, proud to be a university student.



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