

## Never Too Old For Education

One Tuesday, on a warm September night, while preparing for my Adult Education students to get to class, an elderly man walked into the classroom. He was tall, white-headed, and dark eyed. "I'm looking for the GED class." My first thought as a teacher was, he must be the grandfather of a child who had dropped out of school and now he had talked him into getting a GED. That happened occasionally, and as a teacher I always welcomed students into the program even if they were a little reluctant about coming to class. But the older gentleman, wearing jeans and a plaid shirt, looked me straight in the eye and said, "You know anything about the GED?" He sounded a little harsh and didn't smile; I felt intimidated by his direct approach.

"Yes, sir. I'm the teacher."

"I'm here to get my GED. What do I need to do? I know you think I may be a little old to be in school, but it's a personal thing. You see, I made a promise to myself and to some other people to get some things done before I leave this world and my education is one of those things....you know...it's on my bucket list."

I'd taught school for a lot of years and never heard this as a reason to go back to school. The most common reason for returning to school is to earn a GED credential to apply for a job; there's usually another goal to reach. But we take anyone who is interested.

"Sure, come on in and have a seat. I'll tell you everything about getting your GED and we can get started tonight."

That night was the beginning of a great relationship with Clifford. He was a stern sort of fellow, focused and serious about his goal, but many times he drifted into the "way back whens" and I found out he had covered a lot of territory in seventy-five years of living. He served in the armed forces for 20 years and retired. Then, he began a second career and retired again. "My wife and I raised three children. All of them have college degrees. I encouraged my children to get a good education; I was determined my time would come eventually. There are other things on my bucket list, but I don't think I want to wait any longer to finish high school; I'm ready."

Clifford was the oldest of ten children, none of whom had finished high school. "We all had to work hard at home just to get by. Each of us did what we needed to do, but life could have been a lot easier if our parents had encouraged education. The problem was, we had to work to help them put food on the table!"

Clifford had a great work ethic; he knew what hard work meant and had the determination to get his GED. He performed well on all the practice tests, except math. "I'll get it done," he said, "but it might take a little time. I'll take all the other subjects first, then I'll get down to business on that math." He attended class every week and took his tests in reading, science, social studies and writing within a few weeks and passed with flying colors. I was impressed; Clifford had learned a lot of things in life, so I

considered him already “educated”, but we needed to do a little more work for him to be ready to walk across the stage at graduation in June.

Then winter set in with lots of cold, snowy weather, closing classes for several weeks. I was worried Clifford would get discouraged and not return after so much time went by, but in late February he was back, focused and ready to tackle math; he wanted to pass because he had told his children his goal was to be in that graduation. They were excited about his progress and were making plans to travel hundreds of miles to see their dad walk across the stage to receive his GED certificate.

Clifford was under pressure. In March, he took the test, but fell short of passing by 10 points. He had great success quickly with all the other tests, but this one was so hard for him. Afterwards, he didn’t come to class for a couple of weeks, so I called him to give him some encouragement. “I bought a new motorcycle and I’ve been on a trip trying it out. I got family making plans to attend graduation; we’re going to celebrate.” Clifford was surer of himself than I was. I really didn’t see him putting more effort into the math. “I’ve lived a long time and have solved a lot of problems when I had to. I have a lot of common sense and know I can do this.” He came to class and I helped him find his own strategies to approach the math test. He was more confident and so was I!

In May, Clifford took his math test again. He called as soon as he got his score. “Just wanted you to know I’ll be at graduation,” he said; he was one proud and happy man!

At graduation, Clifford gave one of the student speeches about his journey in his GED class. His children were in the audience, applauding and excited about his accomplishment. “I want my children and grandchildren to understand that education is important and that making a commitment is not just words. It takes work and determination. I’ve done what I set out to do. I’m checking this off my bucket list.”

Submitted by: Shirley Carlson

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