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GRADUATION CEREMONIES AT NEW UCF ARENA

64-year-old lands UCF degree from afar

Billie Norczyk needed a B.A. for better job options, so she went online and earned one.

Luis Zaragoza

Sentinel Staff Writer

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UCF graduate Billie Norczyk, 64, with her husband John after the first University of Central Florida graduation ceremony held at the new arena. (ROBERTO GONZALEZ, ORLANDO SENTINEL / December 15, 2007)

For 64-year-old Billie Norczyk, pursuing a bachelor's degree involved firing up the computer in her home office and chatting with professors and fellow students entirely online.

The Palm Bay resident was determined to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Florida to expand her job options in health care but didn't want to trek to the main campus in Orlando to do it.

Rarely setting foot on campus, however, left her feeling disconnected. Until Friday.

Norczyk was beaming as she emerged from the first commencement ceremony to take place at UCF's new arena, where more than 3,000 degrees will be handed out by the end of the final ceremony today. She accepted hugs and kisses from friends and family who stood in a knot amid the crowd of hundreds that had spilled out onto the plaza in front of the arena.

"That was so exciting," she said. "I feel honored and challenged to keep going."

Now equipped with a bachelor's degree in Health Services Administration, the former registered nurse can pursue business-side administrative jobs in hospitals and nursing homes with more confidence. She plans to take her time weighing options.

Students such as Norczyk -- working adults looking for a boost on the career ladder -- are a driving force behind the growth in online education, said Diane Jacobs, chairwoman of the Department of Health Professions at UCF's College of Health and Public Affairs.

Employers in the health-care industry and other fields say they favor making the bachelor's degree a minimum requirement in some professional jobs because the extra years of instruction enable workers to handle more complex work with less on-the-job training, she said.

Job prospects in the health-care industry are good in part because people are living longer, which raises demand for services, Jacobs added.

Increased longevity, she said, also means workers such as Norczyk are choosing to try new lines of work later in life.

"She has many more years of productive work to look forward to," Jacobs said of Norczyk.

Norczyk said it was her husband, John, who challenged her to return to school after she lamented being turned down for a job that required a bachelor's degree. She became a nurse before schools were offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs in the profession.

"I was telling him how much I wanted to get a degree, and he turned to me and said, 'Well, go get one!'"

She began her quest at Brevard Community College, where feeling connected to campus was easy.

"I enjoyed interacting with the kids there," she said.

Moving to UCF's online program two years ago to complete her degree work meant trading those real-life interactions for virtual ones in chat rooms set up for specific classes. It wasn't the same.

"I probably won't remain in contact with students from those online classes," she said. "Some are even more distant from Orlando than I am."

But she was considering joining UCF's alumni association for the networking opportunities.

John Norczyk said he was proud of his wife's accomplishment and would support whatever new work she decides to pursue. Her ability to study online made the entire process "a whole lot easier," he said.

"It's great that the university can make education available to people all over the state, from all walks of life,

online," he added.

With graduation over and the throng in the plaza finally thinning out Friday morning, Norczyk was ready to move on.

She mentioned that during the ceremony, she received a text message on her cell phone from her daughter, Laurie, 36, who lives in Pennsylvania, telling her how proud she was of her mom.

Her daughter had been planning to watch the live webcast of the ceremony.

There also was a chance that Norczyk's son, Luke, 32, who is stationed by the military in Afghanistan, would be able to catch the webcast as well.

"I was thinking during the ceremony that it would be really nice if he was watching," she said.

Luis Zaragoza can be reached at 407-420-5718 or lzaragoza@orlandosentinel.com.

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