A degree 57 years in the making

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She graduated from Clifton High School as a 16-year-old with hopes of obtaining an undergraduate degree from Patterson State College – currently William Patterson College – in New Jersey. Yet it is now, as a 57-year-old mother of three and grandmother of soon-to-be-six, that Barbara Leon will be graduating with a Humanities degree.

“ar you going to keep me on my toes, so I can’t,” Leon said. “I’m learning so much at this point of my life.”

Leon has devoted more than 30 years to helping her husband, Orlando Leon, manage his obstetrics and gynecology office and raise their three children: Orlando, Annie and Robert. Even if it is decades later, Leon wanted to prove she could finish what she started in 1968.

“A college education has given me more confidence,” Leon said. “You’d think at 57 you would already have confidence. I’ve opened up to ideas as to what I could do with this degree.”

Despite graduating with a 3.98 GPA as one of Phi Beta Kappa, Leon was initially not sure how she would perform in university level courses. “I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to keep up intellectually with the students,” Leon said. “I quickly learned that was B.S. and that I could keep up and still learn.”

Additionally, Leon was uncertain of how she would adapt interacting socially with younger peers. Leslie Deonier, 28, is graduating alongside her friend Dec. 15, and she said age difference never hindered her friendship with Leon.

“I don’t see her as old,” Deonier said. “She’s hands down one of my best friends.”

Since Leon’s return to FIU, she has gotten an iPhone and iPad. “I’ve learned all this from the kids,” she said. “They keep me on my toes, dare I say, young. We’re going out tomorrow night for Leslie’s birthday to do whatever you all do for your birthday.”

Deonier said survival college without Leon would’ve been a difficult task. “I don’t think I would’ve made it without her,” Deonier said.

Her husband’s office survived, in large part, due to Leon. She assured her family would make it through any financial skid by working 12-hour days, six times a week, from 1984 to 1989.

She briefly attended then Miami-Dade Community College and FIU in 1990, but money issues and her husband’s request led her back to the office the following year. Leon’s daughter, Annie Puig, understands her mother’s true value.

“She’s my only baby sister,” Puig said of Leon, who watches over her two children: Ceci and Danny. “I could ask her about anything, even how to be a better mom.”

In addition to helping Puig take care of her children, Leon helped her daughter-in-law, Orlando’s wife, obtain her own degree. Leon babysat the couple’s three children while their mother took classes.

“She helped Orlando’s wife finish school, even though she hadn’t,” Puig said. Neglecting her education to help her family was a recurrent theme during Leon’s time away from school.

With her degree almost at hand, Leon is trying to figure out what to do following graduation.

“Then lies my conundrum,” she said. “Am I the good grandma? Am I the good mom that helps out? Am I the rock that I’ve always been for so many people?”

Lasma Iskadarani will graduate with Leon as well, and she pictures her friend in the blue cap and gown. She said she respects her professors deeply and is considering graduate school as an option.

Her daughter has two options for her mother after graduation. “Solely, I would want her to help me. Unselfishly, I think some of her professors have talked to her about grad school,” Puig said.

When Leon steps President Modesto A. Maidique’s hand at the Fall 2008 Commencement Ceremony, she will do with a swell of emotion.

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t get started until now,” she said. “I should’ve started long before I did. But I can’t beat myself over that.”

Leon has not made a definitive choice regarding her life after college, but she is sure about one thing: “I think I should do what I want to do to finally. I’m 57, and I think it’s my turn.”

SUPER SENIOR: Barbara Leon, 57, reads an art book to her 3-year-old granddaughter, Ceci. Leon has five grandchildren and is graduating with a Humanities degree.

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Don’t be a cynic, our journey is just beginning

At graduation, I’ll be sitting next to you as we move from college students to college graduates.

During our college journey, each one of us has learned lessons we’ll never forget. In my three and a half years as a student, I’ve realized that while taking 10 months to study abroad is a good idea, treating French taxi drivers isn’t.

They’ll try you out of 80 euros and leave you stranded 56 miles on the outskirts of Paris at two in the morning.

You’ll have to walk five miles in the snow toward the small airport in the small town that the French taxi driver stranded you.

You’ll hitchike the last mile and then your Spanish friend will realize her European Union identification card is somewhere between mile two and mile three in the patch of snow she desperately used as a toilet.

There were also lessons we never learned.

We all spent nights writing the last pages of essays or cramming a few last concepts seconds before a test.

Procrastination is the biggest stress inducer in college and doing work on time is probably something we never internalized.

At graduation, we’ll feel proud of ourselves for our accomplishments.

But hours later, as we walk out of graduation together, step-by-step into the real world, we’ll find that what’s waiting for us at the other end looks bleak.

Hundreds of students will graduate this semester and next, hundreds of thousands of students graduated last semester but, unfortunately, the job market can’t produce enough jobs to plump all our pockets.

Even worse, the state of the economy has forced employers to reduce the number of positions they already have.

It’s under these gray clouds that we’ve spent our last Francisco academic months as college students and under which I’ve learned the most important lessons of all.

Never be a cynic.

Yes, the economy is in the dumps. Yes, I’ve gotten my share of rejections. But pendulums swing both ways: the economy will bounce back and employers will eventually start hiring again.

Learn to read, you might say. “We went to college to be ready.” Learning doesn’t end when you take off the blue cap and gown.

Know your industry, know your employers want, be experienced – even if it means taking internships and staying at home a little longer.

Learn to create your own opportunities because opportunities never knock in this economy, we all have to learn to be proactive with our lives.

Learn to be brave. If there aren’t any job openings in your area, find a job in another city, another state, another county.

Some, like me, will find that after graduation, there’s a vast horizon in front of them.

Luckier graduates have their path set. They’ll be heading to graduate school or to a job in January.

Whatever your circumstance, I’m sure there’s plenty of people who are happy about, but leave the worrying to your parents.

You never want to be caught in a situation where you’re unprepared — say, in a foreign country where you don’t know the language at two in the morning — but it’s important to remember that the journey, however rocky, however long, however cold is important.

Work hard, have goals, have faith, but most importantly, remember that life is a journey. We’ve just ended one chapter but there’s another one that must be explored, enjoyed and lived — if it is, you’ll always have a story to share the end.
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