

## Empty Nest Mom Heads Back to College

**Cindy Downes Is One of Several Older Americans Headed to Class This Fall**

**Sept. 7, 2007 —**

Intermingled with the fresh faces of first-time freshmen at the nation's universities this fall are some nontraditional students.

"The number of adult learners is increasing rapidly," said Brian Pusser at the University of Virginia. "There will be over a million baby boomers enrolled this fall, some for personal enrichment, others to gain degrees and skills to position themselves for the knowledge-based economy."

Journalism major Cindy Downes is part of a growing trend of adult students over the age of 45 flocking to college campuses.

The 57-year-old is a sophomore at Oklahoma State University, and her original journey to campus began in 1968.

"I got a Betty Crocker Homemakers Award scholarship and off I went," she said. "I was going to be a home-economics teacher."

### **Getting a 'Mrs. Degree'**

After spending two years at the University of Delaware, Downes' academic goals wavered. And when Downes married Bill, her long-time love, she decided to drop out of school.

"I got my "Mrs. degree" you could say," she said. "[It's] a degree I still have."

Yet her decision to leave college left her uneasy and weighed heavily on her. Then when her father died in 2005, Downes' re-evaluated her long-ago decision.

"He was devastated when I dropped out, because here I had a scholarship," she said. "[I] was going to be the first child ever in the family to get a college degree, and I quit."

Downes said she knew that decision had really disappointed her father.

### **Honoring a Father**

So, using the money he left her, Downes decided to honor her father by hitting the books and going back to finish what she started.

"I am determined to get as many A's as possible," she said.

Her determination drives her to arrive at school hours before her classmates.

Downes also studies two to three hours a day. She has even gotten a jump-start on her journalistic career by starting a blog called "Empty Nest Mom Goes to College."

But Downes doesn't blaze the college trail alone. When she hits the college grounds, one familiar face is there with her. Her daughter Shelly, who was inspired by her mother, has also returned to college this year.

"When I am finished I am going to throw a big party," Downes said. "I am really working the old brain cells, and I am going to be really proud of myself."

### **Tips for Going Back to School**

Diane Salvatore, the editor in chief of Ladies Home Journal, joined "Good Morning America" with specific tips for older adults heading back to school. She also announced that "GMA's" Robin Roberts will become a special contributor to the magazine, offering advice and insight to readers.

- Start out by taking classes at a community college. They often cater to older students, have more classes and cost much less than four-year colleges and universities.
- Try to negotiate for "life credits." If you are going back for a business degree, for example, and you know PowerPoint or have some management experience, you may be able to get academic credit.
- If you can't travel to school, check out "distance learning" courses, where you do your course work online. Generally, these online degrees are as legit as other degrees, but be careful to check the school's accreditation.
- Many women returning to school are looking into teaching and radiology. In two years, you can become an employable radiology technician. The field is exploding and skilled people are still needed. There is also a nurse shortage around the country, so trained nurses are in high demand.

For more information on older adults returning to college, check out [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org) or [www.kendal.org](http://www.kendal.org).

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