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Mary Lloyd gets a hug from Colvin Adult Learning Center Program Director Travis Combs after she received her GED recently at the age of 85. “The brain needs to get to going,” Lloyd said. “Use it or lose it, isn’t that what they say?” Courtesy photo

Mary Lloyd earns GED at age 85

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Dropping out of high school isn’t uncommon these days. Nor is going back to earn a GED — Graduation Equivalency Diploma.

But a nearly 70-year-gap between the two events? That’s unusual. Unless your name is Mary

Lloyd.

The 85-year-old Liberal woman recently earned her GED at the Seward County Community College's Colvin Outreach Center.

Lloyd's journey away from high school and back again connected to family, both times.

Her parents' divorce interrupted Lloyd's junior year in high school. What might be viewed as a sad but common family breakup in today's culture was out of the ordinary in 1943, and the consequences were disastrous.

"Way back then, people didn't get divorces," Lloyd said. "My mother had an awful time. I was an only child, and I started working to help out with the bills." Mary took a job at a drug store, then started work as a telephone operator.

"I told my mother, 'We'll make it,' and next thing you know, I quit school. It was a matter of survival," Lloyd said. "You have to eat and pay your bills."

A long and happy marriage, children, multiple moves and many jobs later, Lloyd's daughter encouraged her to give school another try.

"I don't know why she thought of it, but my daughter in Bartlesville got it in her head that her mother needed a GED," Lloyd said. "And she just kept at me, and then she got Michele to help."

That's Michele Stoddard, a family friend who Lloyd met when they both worked at the Liberal Walmart store. Lloyd still answers the phone and runs the dressing room at the discount store. Stoddard is now the activities director at the Liberal Senior Center.

“She knows how to get things done,” said Lloyd. That included bringing her longtime friend to the Colvin Center to find out what it would take to earn a GED.

During that first visit, program director Travis Combs said he wasn’t sure Lloyd would sign up for the test when Stoddard brought the rather reluctant student to the center.

“She was really disinterested when she came in,” he said.

“Well, I was worried, ‘cause I’d been out of school so long,” Lloyd recalled tartly. “It has changed so much. I’d never used a calculator. I didn’t know how to use the computers. And I said, ‘I will never write an essay.’”

Combs suggested, “Why don’t you take the practice test,” and when she finished, he recalled, “she told me ‘You grade it right now!’”

The results were better than average — and Lloyd’s love of learning had been rekindled.

“She only missed two questions, which meant she didn’t need to go through all the classes to prepare for the real tests,” Combs said. “She was excited from that point on.”

The GED exam is comprised of five separate tests: reading, writing, math, social studies and science, with 50 questions each. Students are not told their results until all five tests have been completed. If they don’t pass one of the subjects, they are allowed to try again, twice, within a two-year period. Combs and Lloyd devised a five-week plan, and she sped through the process, pausing to panic when she realized she would, in fact, have to write an essay.

Stoddard’s daughter, Alyssa — a student at Liberal High School — was enlisted to provide tutoring.

“She wrote me an essay to help me see what to do, and then she had me write a couple,” Lloyd said. “I got it done.”

Another delay occurred when Lloyd moved on to science.

“I had to retake that one,” she said ruefully. “That was because I tried to do two tests in one day, and I was tired.”

By that time, Lloyd was determined to finish the task. She studied up, retook the science test, and graduated with a higher-than-average score.

“I’ve been in adult education two and a half years, and while it’s not unusual for people to go straight to pre-testing, others need classes to prepare,” Combs said. “Some take a year, three months. But Mary just tore through them at a really fast pace.”

“Well, a lot of it was just common sense,” Lloyd said. “If you keep up with reading the newspaper and pay attention, you’d know a lot of these things.”

“You’ve been a lifelong learner,” Combs observed. “That makes a huge difference.”

To Lloyd, that’s just another case of common sense:

“The brain needs to get to going,” she said. “Use it or lose it, isn’t that what they say?”

Combs said Lloyd’s grit and good humor have enlivened the center.

“From the day she came in, she was a spitfire,” he said. “Mary is great. Occasionally she would come in with donuts. Everyone got attached. We kind of adopted her like a grandma.”

For future students, Lloyd also serves as a role model.

“We had enrollment on Monday, and I did make it a point to let them know that we’ve got a student who is 85 years old, and she’s still learning,” Combs said. “It’s never too late to get your education.”

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