

Burke Woman Achieves Educational Goal At 80

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HILDEBRAN — Vergie Johnson used to spend her days cleaning house, keeping the lawn mowed, working in her gardens, raking leaves, drying apples, baking food for others and attending church.

The 80-year-old took some of these activities off her priority list last year, though, when she enrolled in a General Educational Development class at Western Piedmont Community College to get a high school diploma.

"It's something I'd always wanted to do. Since I didn't have anything else to do," Ms. Johnson said laughingly, "I thought I'd go ahead and do it."

Disagreeing with Ms. Johnson's definition of busy, GED instructor Mary Hewat, said: "She

does more than any three people I know."

Clarifying herself, Ms. Johnson said: "Well, it was just the same old thing over and over every day. Sometimes I just want to get out away from home for a little while."

In addition to desiring a change, she wanted to broaden her horizons beyond the seven years of education she had completed in 1931. Seeing a program on television about a 90-year-old getting his GED ignited that desire.

"I thought, 'Well, if he can, I can, too,'" Ms. Johnson said. "I had almost given up hope, then I thought, 'Well, I'll try it.' And I couldn't

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Record Photo By Robert Reece

80-Year-Old Vergie Johnson, Left, And Mary Hewat

have done it without (the class's) encouragement."

Ms. Hewat interjected, "She encouraged us. She just walked in off the street one day. I had a class ... and there was this cute little lady who said, 'I'd like to try.' I said, 'Come on. We'll do it.'"

"She came in and just started being an inspiration to all of us," Ms. Hewat said. "Nothing I handed her was too much of a challenge. She jumped in with both feet. Sometimes she'd get discouraged and say, 'I can't do this,' but she'd get back up and try again, and just kept going and going and going."

In each of the five subject areas — literature, social studies, science, math and writing — Ms. Hewat gives students pre-tests to see what areas need emphasis. "And then when I think they're about where they need to be," she said, "they take a practice test. And when they do well on that, they go up to the college."

Ms. Johnson said she was a little nervous at the beginning, but felt better after passing the first test — literature.

In preparing for the literature test, Ms. Hewat reviewed prose and poetry. "And I got her to read a novel ('Nop's Trials'), and she read it all the way through and enjoyed it," Ms. Hewat said.

She also asked her students to write a journal entry in class every day. "That really does a lot of different things," Ms. Hewat said. "It's a stress reliever. They can often write what they don't want to say. And writing, like reading, is just a matter of practice. Without being too judgmental, I try to help them pull those skills up, too and that carries over."

Ms. Johnson also did well in the writing category. "Her creative writing is beautiful," Ms. Hewat said. "I'd always give them a topic, and have them go from there. Her writing improved and started showing her sense of humor," which Mary said is natural because people often write in the same style as they talk.

Ms. Johnson saved math for last, saying it always was her worst subject. And she knew this math class would include algebra and geometry along with fractions, decimals and percentages.

"She had never even had any ex-

posure to it (algebra and geometry) ever," Ms. Hewat said. "But she very tenaciously just plowed through it. If she didn't understand something, on her own, she'd just back up and go again."

Setting up equations from word problems and then solving was an area which caused her a little trouble. But since she only needed a cumulative total of 225 points, she was able to get by with the math, earning a total of 231 points.

"She did a lot of work at home. A lot of people don't, but Vergie did," Ms. Hewat said.

Vergie admitted, "Well, now some days I would, and some days I wouldn't. There were several days when I didn't even open a book."

Making a habit of opening a book again and studying was not difficult for her, though. She had spent countless number of years working with her late husband, Toon Blair "T.B.," at his business, East Springs Manufacturing Co. Ms. Johnson served as his executive assistant, answering phones, writing checks and taking orders.

"I guess that helped me some," she said.

Several years after her husband

died in 1972, she moved back to her homeplace and built a home on three of the family's 125 acres.

Before retiring, Ms. Johnson worked in the cafeteria at George Hildebrand Elementary School for six years.

So, when she started thinking about getting her diploma, she was uncertain how her family would react. "I said to one of my nephews, 'I guess you think I'm going crazy, but I think I'm going to start back to school.'"

Obviously, they were a little surprised, she said, but very supportive. And as a graduation gift, her family members pitched in to buy a GED ring in place of a class ring.

So, how is Ms. Johnson going to fill her afternoons now that she's earned her diploma?

"I've got so much packed back that I need to go through. I need to tend to my flowers, the trees need trimming, weeds need pulled."

But as she returns to her regular routine, life will be a little different. She'll perhaps carry around a little more pride as she glances up and sees her diploma framed on the wall or at her finger and sees the blue sapphire, her birthstone, shining up at her.