



News Release

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STEWARTSVILLE WOMAN, 80, TO RECEIVE DEGREE FROM MISSOURI WESTERN

St. Joseph, Mo. —May 10, 2005— Geraldine “Jerry” Marie Benitz is elevating the term “nontraditional student” to a new level.

Next Saturday, May 14, she will receive a bachelor of science degree in history at Missouri Western State College. About five weeks earlier, on April 7, she observed her 80th birthday.

A nontraditional student usually is defined as one who is 24 years of age or older. She qualifies on that score, and also as a dedicated student. In the four years it took her to qualify for the degree, she missed only one class. And that was on an icy winter morning when a traffic pileup just outside Stewartsville, Mo., where she lives, prevented her from reaching the campus.

So why did she decide to go back to college at an age when most people are content to retire? “Why not?” she asks. “It gets me up and going.”

The spry, energetic little lady adds, “I have enjoyed it tremendously. It was easy for me. I want to express my thanks and gratitude to everyone on the campus.”

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Did she feel out of place in class? “Not at all. I haven’t seen any disrespect for me. Some of the young men usually open the door for me. It’s fun to be around them. It keeps me younger.”

Were the classes difficult? “Not really. At first I felt guilty, because I didn’t pay any tuition, you know. (Tuition is waived for seniors at Western.) I couldn’t help but ask a lot of questions,” she continues. “I had wonderful teachers. One of them sure used a lot of red ink on my tests, and I told him about that.”

What will she do with her degree? “I don’t know. I’ll see how it feels this summer. I’m going to quit going to school and see how it goes.” But she has already signed up to be a volunteer at the Patee House Museum in St. Joseph.

This is not the first time Jerry Benitz has gone to college. She was born and grew up in Doniphan County, Kansas, just across the river from St. Joseph. She went to a country school in the county, and later taught at that same school. “You didn’t have to have a degree in those days to teach,” she recalls.

In 1942 she started going to Highland Junior College. But she didn’t stay long. “Like a dummy, I quit, “ she says now. She and her husband, who attended the same country school with her, began farming. Then in the 1980s, during tough economic times, they lost the farm, and moved to Missouri. He died in 1999.

Jerry got a job at the old Missouri Methodist Hospital in the business office. Later she became secretary to Warren Hinton, administrator at the hospital for many years, and held that position for 33 years.

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So how does it feel to get the degree finally? “Great. It was a goal of mine. It was a tribute to my parents. I did it, folks.”

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Missouri Western State College is a four-year public institution providing a blend of traditional liberal arts and professional degree programs. The college offers student-centered, high quality instruction that focuses on experience-based learning, community service, and state-of-the-art technology. Western is located in St. Joseph, Mo. and is committed to the educational, economic, cultural and social development of the region it serves.