It’s Never Too Late . . .

Continuing education has been quite the topic in my house for the past year as my wife enters the stretch run of obtaining her Master’s in Education. There have been deep conversations about the discrepancies of equal access to college for those of varying backgrounds, and that the expectation of attending college is not as common for all as it was for us while growing up. I often think about returning to school to pursue a Master’s degree of my own. I’m unsure why I’ve yet to pull the trigger, though I suspect some has to do with my career as writer and PR professional and that I can’t envision writing more for school on top of my day-to-day. But, I digress...

As nice as it is to contemplate pursuing an advanced degree, there are many—our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers—who wrestle with thoughts of returning to college to finish a degree they once started. But with life seemingly becoming more hectic for all of us with each passing week, the process can seem more daunting than the coursework itself. Especially if it’s been years, or even decades, since you graduated a classroom.

But with September being all about Back to School, I want to share a program—and a success story—that proves it’s never too late to finish what you started. And appropriately, that's what it's called, the University of Rhode Island’s “Finish What You Started” (FWYS) program.

Designed specifically for adults looking to return to college after a break in their academic careers, FWYS is a hands-on program that walks students through the re-entry process—services and procedures of returning to the classroom. Through a nurturing environment, regular follow-up and layers of extra help and support, FWYS coordinators work with students from application to matriculation and on through graduation. The program offers the full spectrum of degrees available at URI and works with students attending any of the University’s campuses.

The approach of Finish What You Started has proven successful; to-date, we have helped nearly 200 adult learners complete their degrees,” says Nancy Fee Rabidoux, FWYS Program Coordinator at URI’s Kingston campus. “There are many reasons why people do not finish college, but it’s never too late to come back and we’re here to help.”

Some of the most common reasons for leaving school that Nancy and her colleagues see among those they work with include financial difficulties, health issues, uncertain academic goals, job responsibilities and family obligations. But regardless of how someone left the classroom, FWYS coordinators are committed to streamlining the process and providing the supports that help students return.

While the average age of a FWYS student is 37 years-old, the program’s oldest student is 83, and there are plenty in between. Adult learners may also be able to apply their life experiences to their coursework, along with transferring over credits previously earned. Financial Aid is also available for students who qualify and take at least six credits per semester.

“It is rewarding to discover that you can learn at any age,” says Nancy. “Many of our students have already put their own children through college and feel that now it is their turn.”

Once a prospective student contacts FWYS, they are assigned to a coordinator who will work with them from start to finish. It takes an estimated 7-10 hours of work to register an adult learner from initial contact to enrolling in their first class. Nancy is quick to point out that every student is different, and FWYS does not have a one-size-fits-all approach. So whether someone is looking to return to college to advance their current job, achieve a personal accomplishment, be a role model for their children, or pursue a better or second career, they’ll find all of the help and support they need.

For Jo-Anne Serydynski, that support made all the difference in the world.

A few years back, as Jo-Anne approached her 50th birthday, the married, mother of two saw the milestone as a life transition and wanted to do something profound. So, she made a bucket list. Top on the list were completing a marathon, a triathlon, and hiking Mount Washington.

As Jo-Anne hiked with her friends, the group’s conversations turned to their careers and education. While successful in her field of work as an Associate Director for a local nonprofit organization, Jo-Anne always held a sense of regret for not having completed her degree. She spoke openly about it and a member of the group told her about FWYS. She quickly envisioned another item being added to her list.

“I graduated high school in 1980 and went right to URI that fall,” says Jo-Anne. “It was my first time away from home and I really didn’t have a great understanding of what to expect—it was a difficult transition.”

Jo-Anne lived on campus her first two years and changed her major a couple of times as a result of her uncertainty. After her sophomore year, she moved back home and got a job, but continued to attend classes. With money in her pocket for the first time and a growing love for the group home work she was doing, the part-time student became a very part-time student and then withdrew altogether.

Jo-Anne Serydynski (right) and her sister, Ann-Marie Vuocolo (left), share a moment with their mother, Isabelle Vuocolo, after graduating from URI's Finish What You Started program this May. The ceremony, coincidentally, fell on their mother's 83rd birthday. Photo courtesy of Jo-Anne Serydynski.
‘Finish What You Started’

“...My job wasn’t affected by not having my degree. I was advancing somewhat quickly...” recalls Jo-Anne. “Then I got married and had kids. We put them through college and money was allocated to the family, not necessarily my education.”

The Monday after returning from that hike, Jo-Anne sent an email to FWYS and received a response in less than 24 hours. Within three days, she had an appointment with an academic advisor and was on her way.

When she had left URI, Jo-Anne was pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Development and Family Studies and had a little more than a year remaining. Her advisor helped determine which previously-earned credits could carry over and what courses were needed next. Before she knew it, she was in a classroom.

“...There was certainly the apprehension of being that older, non-traditional student walking into the classroom, but everyone was great—from the other students to my professors,” says Jo-Anne. “And, I can’t say enough about the Finish What You Started coordinators and advisors.”

Thought there were some learning curves around how college has changed—a heavier reliance on computers and submitting coursework electronically—it didn’t take Jo-Anne long to get up to speed.

This past May, she graduated with a 4.0 grade-point-average and a spot on the Dean’s List. The icing on the cake? Her sister walked with her, completing her degree after being inspired by Jo-Anne and needing just a few classes herself—the procession ceremony falling on their mother’s 83rd birthday.

“This was absolutely the best thing I could have done—the people at the University and everyone in my life were just so supportive,” says Jo-Anne. “The best advice I can give someone is don’t wait another day; send an email, put it out there and explore your options.”

FWYS’s highly-dedicated coordinators take the guesswork out of the process, which many find far more appealing than searching online to figure things out on their own. The program also offers tutoring, a writing center, disability and veteran services, and personal and career counseling, all of which are offered at the newly-revamped Office of Academic and Student Affairs at URI’s Providence Campus, in addition to resources on the Kingston campus.

And with a wide array of courses available online, during the evenings, and through two summer sessions and an academic mini-semester during winter break, the program has options to work within the lifestyles and work schedules of prospective students.

“While our success rate is impressive—20 percent of those who inquire about our program enroll—being a part of a student’s academic journey is simply an amazing experience,” says Nancy. “Watching them walk across the stage at graduation is not only rewarding, it’s very emotional.”

If you’re interested in learning more about the Finish What You Started program, visit http://web.uri.edu/finish/. You may also contact Nancy Fee Rabideau directly at (401) 874-2413, or nfrabideau@uri.edu for information related to offerings on the Kingston campus. For the Providence campus, contact FWYS coordinator Connie Pritchard at (401) 277-0404, or cpritchard@uri.edu.

---

Cornerstone Adult Services, Just like family

Providing support during the day
- Restorative therapy
- Nursing care
- Exceptional programs

Cornerstone has five adult day centers in RI:
3270 Post Road, Warwick, RI 02886
60 Wood Street, Coventry, RI 02816
172 Franklin Street, Bristol, RI 02809
115 East Main Road, Little Compton, RI 02837
Alzheimer’s Care Center
140 Warwick Neck Avenue, Warwick, RI 02889

Member Saint Elizabeth Community
www.stelizabethcommunity.org
A CareLink partner and non-profit, nonsectarian 501(c) charitable organization