

“Deeper Understanding”

By Deirdre Galvin

Bloomsburg University Magazine

It's 4:30 on a warm afternoon. Emily Rupert, a sophomore majoring in anthropology and history, prepares for a final exam in English, reviewing notes on Emerson and Thoreau between phone calls at her work/study job on the second floor of Benjamin Franklin Hall.

In many ways, Rupert seems like a typical student on this day. She's a little nervous about her English exam, and looks forward to a slower pace during the summer when she'll take only a physical education class. She dreams about one day participating in an archeological dig.

But, like many of the people she works with at the adult advisement office, her age sets her apart from most of her classroom peers. Sophomore Emily Rupert is 63 years old.

The vast majority of Bloomsburg University's nearly 7,000 undergraduates are traditional students, ages 17 to 24, but more than 700 are considered “nontraditional,” ranging in age from 25 to 79. Of these, 46 students are at least 50 years old, 141 are in their 40s, and 260 are in their 30s.

Like many older adult students, Rupert raised a family and held a job for many years before having the opportunity to attend college. As a result, she is highly motivated and truly appreciates the experience.

“I just love it,” the Bloomsburg resident says. “I always wanted to go to college. This is the fulfillment of a dream.”

Rupert's dream to attend college followed an experience that could have become a nightmare. After working for Acme Markets for 27 years, Rupert found herself unemployed when the store was sold and then closed.

Adult students know how difficult life can be without a college degree and, as a result, often show a greater appreciation for the experience, says Thomas Aleto, professor of anthropology and Rupert's advisor.

“They tend to be more interested in learning than getting a particular grade,” he says. “And they look at college as a privilege, not a right.”

Aleto says older students also share perspectives and life experiences that can be beneficial to the whole class, especially in a course such as cultural anthropology.

“Their comments and observations about topics like marriage and family life add a lot to the discussion that you can't get from 18- to 22-year-olds,” Aleto says.

Another nontraditional student, 39-year-old William Davenport, brings to class his experiences from “at least a half dozen careers so far.” A senior, he plans to graduate in December 2000 with a degree in English and a secondary teaching certificate.

The Berwick resident decided to pursue a career in education after serving as an instructor in the Navy. His wife, Sally, also 39, graduated from college in summer 1999 and now teaches at a Bloomsburg elementary school.

“If I had gone to college straight out of high school, I would have dropped out,” Davenport shares. “I definitely was not mature enough or focused enough.”

With some of his tuition paid by the G.I. Bill, Davenport shoulders the remaining costs, a fact that helps him to stay very focused on his studies. “There’s no such thing as blowing off homework or skipping classes.”

Concentrating on 18 credits during the spring semester, Davenport worked part-time while continuing to create portraits and perform as a bassist and vocalist in his band, The Big House. His wife sings and plays keyboard in the band.

Davenport’s enthusiasm for learning is particularly evident when he is asked about long-term plans. “When I graduate this year, that won’t be the end of it,” he says. “Even if it wasn’t required for teachers to continue their education, I would. I don’t plan to stop until I’m dead...or I have a doctorate.”

Patricia Lenhart, coordinator of the university’s adult advisement program, finds a major issue older students face is lack of time. “Most are between 30 and 50 years old. They have children or aging parents to care for and jobs. It can be difficult to fit classes into their schedules. Also, they tend to be in a hurry to get done. My job is often to advise them to slow down so they can be successful.”

Also they face the fear that comes from doing something entirely new. “It’s like they’re in a foreign country where they don’t know the language and the rules,” Lenhart says.

At the adult advisement office, nontraditional students find information about everything from parking regulations and ID cards to alternative ways to earn college credit - such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams and experiential learning credits. The office runs a three-hour orientation program at the beginning of each semester featuring information on time management and study skills.

Lenhart was once a nontraditional student herself, entering college at age 37. “I still don’t know how I did it,” says the mother of four. “But in the process I discovered myself and had the time of my life.”

She graduated in 1986 with a bachelor of arts degree in social welfare and, three years later, earned a master’s degree in communications.

Lenhart recommends nontraditional students take the one-credit University Seminar taught by Ronald Digiondomenico, director of academic advisement. The course addresses topics such as scheduling, academic policies and procedures, and choosing a major.

In conversations with older students, Digiondomenico has learned their top two concerns are time and money. Most, he says, are attending college in order to get a better job that will provide a higher standard of living for their families and themselves. Many are single parents. Most have strong ties to the Bloomsburg region and therefore choose majors that will prepare them for area jobs.

“They are a lot of fun to teach,” Digiondomenico says. “They are excited about learning and have an attitude that is refreshing.

“Adult students bring a lot of variety to campus,” he adds. “You name it, they’ve done it – from blue collar jobs, to volunteering, to being parents.”

Digiondomenico notes that older students often have the odds stacked against them as they strive to succeed. Some don’t make it, but many do.

Guy Massaro is one who made it. Last spring, Massaro earned a bachelor’s degree in social welfare at age 56. When he was 50, Massaro was forced into early retirement, brought about by the downsizing of the Philadelphia company where he worked as an

electrician for 28 years. After some soul-searching, he decided to pursue a new career direction, and entered Bloomsburg University in summer 1995.

“I had always valued education and had put both my kids through college. I thought, ‘now’s my turn,’” he recalls.

At first, Massaro was uncertain about whether he’d be able to do college-level work, but his confidence grew after he earned a “B” in an English class during that first summer semester.

Although he sometimes felt “out of the loop” with traditional students, Massaro found common ground with fellow nontraditional students. He formed friendships with several faculty members, something he said was easier for an older student. He also took advantage of the services provided by the adult advisement program.

“I don’t know if I would have completed my degree without Pat Lenhart’s help,” he adds.

In summer 2000, Massaro took his education to the next level when he entered Temple University to study for a master’s degree in social work.

Vivian “Jeanne” Kopf, 79, has the distinction of being Bloomsburg University’s oldest student. A registered nurse since 1941, Kopf decided to take college courses after her husband died and she found herself with time on her hands.

Because she is over 60, she can take courses tuition-free as long as space is available. She has yet to declare a major, but is interested in physical sciences and psychology.

Kopf says she is amazed at how many hours she needs to study for each course. Initially, she had some difficulty becoming accustomed to taking tests scored by computer, but overall she believes she has adjusted well.

Younger students have reacted positively toward her, she adds, after they realize she is truly interested in the class and not simply observing.

“It has been a tremendous experience so far,” she says. “All of the professors are tremendous. They are seriously interested in seeing the students do well and give an enormous amount of time.”

Nontraditional students bring an inspirational role model to the classroom, says psychology professor John Baird, Jr.

At first, traditional-age students in his Lifespan Psychology class were surprised to see Kopf among them, he says, but as the semester progressed their surprise turned to curiosity and finally to admiration.

“The classroom is a bi-directional learning situation,” Baird says. “The older students always raise their hand, always have an opinion, and always do their assignments. They are here because they want to learn and because they want to step their lives up to a new plateau,” he says. They keep instructors on their toes, and we learn as much from them as they do from us.”